

on the mountain trail

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by [kath_trashh](#)

Summary

dreamteam in a truck, what will they do

Giving a coat to a half-freezing guy at a truck stop in the middle of nowhere isn't exactly what Clay or Nick would have called romantic. But that's what they're working with here. And when it's three guys in the back of a cramped truck, maybe they'll have to fall in love. Or maybe they won't. Maybe they'll just pine over each other on the open road instead.

This is just a trucker AU. Dream and Sapnap are truckers, and they take George along with them.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

I.

i.

The first snow is always the best. There's something about it, where Clay can break out his fluffy coat and drink the first sip of hot coffee that he can't forget. It never gets old. Somehow, every winter becomes this new experience, this memory of watching Nick continually torch his fingers on coffee that's far too hot to the touch (*"If it's too hot to touch, then it's too hot to drink, Sapnap," Clay teases. Nick flushes a little at Clay's words, flipping him the bird.*) even though he *knows* better, *knows* that his tolerance of hot things is about as pitiful as it can be.

Nick blows on the hot steam coming from his coffee, his cheeks flushed pink from the cold.

"Are we still making good progress on the road?" Nick asks.

"Yeah, think so. We can probably be out of this state by, mm... tonight, maybe? Give or take a few hours. I can drive," Clay offers. "You were up all night driving."

"Yeah, that's 'cos I couldn't sleep. Some *idiot* was snoring all night," Nick snickers, elbowing Clay hard between the ribs. "That's why I'm drinking *espresso* right now. I don't even *like* espresso."

"Quit being such a baby; I'll make up for all the lost time. *Simping Beauty* needs his rest," Clay laughs, smirking at the way Nick flushes, burying his face in his fluffy jacket. As Clay nudges Nick more insistently now, followed by Nick loudly telling Clay to *stop, stop, stop it--*, Clay stops nudging when he sees a flash of blue. Clay's eyes widened a little bit, squinting to get a closer look.

"Okay, so, is it normal to not be wearing a winter coat in thirty-degree weather, or...?" Nick questions, looking at...

Clay shakes his head.

"Not even Canadians are that hardcore. Or they might be, I dunno. Maybe Russians. Have you seen those videos where they, like, jump out of a building or something? *That's* hardcore," Clay says, though he knows that's a stupidly far fetch, even for him. But the guy they've suddenly started ogling doesn't look used to the cold at all. He's dressed in the thinnest jacket that Clay has ever seen, especially for this kind of weather— and he's blowing on his hands, rubbing his arms to try

and conserve warmth that quickly gets sucked away by the cold. His dark hair already has snowflakes nested in it, and he's absolutely *shaking*. From the distance, Clay can't tell whether the guy's lips are blue or not. They probably are.

Clay feels a bit sorry for the guy.

After all, it sucks to be out in the cold with close to nothing.

"I'm gonna go talk to him," Nick says. "We have a spare jacket in the truck, right?"

"Yeah, we do. I mean, what are you— *oh*. " Clay suddenly realizes what Nick's about to do. "I mean, are you sure? Can we trust him?"

"Look, it's just one coat, and we're big boys who can buy more." Nick opens his hand for the keys, and Clay throws them right into Nick's hand perfectly. Nick heads for the truck, unlocking the door before clambering in and coming out with one of Clay's coats— it's the first one Clay ever bought when he started trucking, and he wouldn't deny that it was sentimental.

"Come on, Sap, not *that one*, " Clay whines, but Nick has already crossed the blacktop over to the guy still shivering.

"Here," Nick says.

The guy jolts from his stupor, looking up at Nick in shock.

"What?" the guy asks quietly. Clay can't help but notice the British accent, and wonders what a guy with a British accent is doing all the way here at a rest stop in the middle of nowhere. In *America*.

Maybe he's sightseeing?

Clay, why the fuck would you sightsee in the middle of nowhere, at a truck stop? It's not even one of the fancy ones where you can buy souvenirs.

“You looked cold,” Nick says. He holds out the coat. “You can borrow this.”

The guy eyes the coat suspiciously. His hand twitches a little. Almost outstretches his fingers so he can touch it. Clay can’t really read expressions that well, but the guy’s eyes are practically screaming that he’s *freezing*. He’s shivering, the poor thing— and upon closer inspection, his lips really are blue.

It’s honestly a miracle that the guy hasn’t already collapsed from hypothermia or something.

“Is there a catch?” the guy asks.

Nick shakes his head.

“Nope,” Nick says. He glances over at Clay.

“No catch,” Clay says. “Just a bit of goodwill. You’ll freeze to death without a good coat in these kinds of temperatures.”

Maybe for this guy, he wouldn’t mind parting with his jacket.

“...” the guy takes the jacket, unzipping it and putting it on. The sleeves are far too big for him, dangling over his hands, and as he pulls the hood over his face, it almost collapses over his eyes entirely.

It’s kind of cute.

“Thanks,” the guy murmurs, his voice already sounding grateful to be in warmth.

“No problem. I’m Nick, by the way. This is my partner Clay,” Nick says, pointing first at himself and then at Clay. The guy looks up— (he has to shift the hood upwards by a lot, Clay’s heart squeezes a little as he sees it) and smiles a little. The smile doesn’t rise to the guy’s brown eyes, which seem melancholic. Reserved.

“George,” he says. “My name’s George.”

“Well, George, what brings you out here?” Nick asks conversationally.

George seems to freeze a little at that, coughing into his clenched fist.

“Um, I’m out to visit a friend.” George’s eyes flicker to the right a little, not meeting Nick’s eyes when he says it. Clay can’t help but get a faint impression that George is lying. It might be the fact that George is bad at lying. It probably is, because George quickly changes the subject. “So, what about you two?”

“Nick and I are truckers,” Clay says. “We usually work interstate delivering cargo, that kind of thing. We’re out for usually weeks at a time at this point, right?”

Nick nods.

“Oh,” George says dumbly. “That’s pretty hard work, isn’t it? There aren’t that many truckers in Britain, I wouldn’t know.”

“It’s not lonely when there’s two of us,” Clay says cheerfully. “We can switch out easily for longer trips. It’s harder when it’s only one driver.” Nick nods emphatically at that.

“I see,” George says thinly, tucking his hands into the coat’s pockets. “Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you guys from your work-- and you should probably take the jacket back.” George doesn’t make much of a convincing case for returning it-- he looks hesitant to part with it, and Clay lifts a hand to stop George from taking off the jacket.

“No, it’s fine. You can return it to us if we ever meet again. It’s a gift,” Clay blurts out.

George raises an eyebrow, a giggle leaving his lips.

“And how am I supposed to meet you guys again?”

It's ridiculous, Clay realizes. To think that three people, out of the seven billion in the world, out of the millions of people living in America-- could manage to meet again at a truckers' rest stop. The odds didn't seem in their favor at all. But still, there was at least *one* odd.

"I mean, you could drive?" Nick says, phrasing it more like a suggestion. "This place is pretty far out as it is-- you would've had to drive to get here." There's something about the way Nick phrases that statement-- like he's waiting for George to admit something. George's brow furrows, his lower lip juts out. Nick's found something.

"I took an Uber here," George says.

"An *Uber*?" Clay sputters. "That's so expensive, though! That driver must have charged you a lot to drive you out here . "

"Yeah," George murmurs. "I'm out of money."

Nick and Clay exchange glances.

George's hands rise to his shoulders, squeezing the fabric of Clay's coat.

"Look," George stammers, "I've got a friend that's going to pick me up later, so don't worry about it. Thank you for the jacket. I don't want to keep wasting your time like this, so please just go." Nick opens his mouth to protest, but George shoots Nick a desperate look. Raw, *frightened*.

Nick shuts his mouth.

Clay realizes there's no use in continuing to pry at George, or whatever's going on.

"Alright," Clay says. "We'll be here for a bit, so if you need to find us, just come looking. We won't be very far."

George acknowledges that with a nod, but doesn't say anything else. Clay turns on his heel,

beckoning Nick towards him.

“We gotta do something,” Nick blurts out immediately once he’s sure George is out of earshot. Clay gives Nick a look. “*What?* Don’t tell me you’re going to leave that guy by his lonesome in good conscience.”

“Of course I can’t! But if he doesn’t want to be helped, there’s nothing we can do,” Clay hisses. “You realize he could ruin our careers in a single moment? If we took him, he could claim we kidnapped him and everything would be over!”

“I don’t... you’re right, but I don’t think George is like that,” Nick says.

“How would you know? We *just* met him,” Clay responds.

Nick shrugs.

“It-it’s just a feeling. Can’t explain it,” Nick says. “But let’s just ignore that for now. We’re here to pick up supplies, right? We’re out of apples. I really, *really* want an apple.”

“Alright, alright, you big baby. We’ll go get you some fruit,” Clay says. As they enter the small supply store, Nick immediately shoots for the produce section, picking out a few fruits that look like they’ll keep for the week. Bananas, pears, apples, oranges-- dumping them into a small basket. Clay rolls his eyes, a laugh leaving his lips as he picks out a few bags of pretzels, chips.

“Let’s get this,” Nick says, picking up a large family-size bag of Funyuns.

“You never finish eating these,” Clay says in mock outrage. “You always eat all the whole pieces, and then give me the scraps and tell me to deal with it.”

“I snack when I’m driving! I literally *can’t* get the corners where the crumbs are, you know that!” Nick laughs, elbowing Clay in the side. Clay wheezes a little, a choked laugh leaving his lips.

“Alright, alright, *fine*. Let’s get a bag.”

Nick puts in two bags for good measure.

ii.

“I’m thinking we get a bite before going on the road,” Nick says.

“Subway again?” Clay asks.

“You know it, baby,” Nick says, affecting a thick British accent. Nick tries to maintain a straight face, but then his nose scrunches in laughter and he falls forward, slumping on Clay’s shoulder.

“Oh, you are *absolutely* awful,” Clay says fondly, pushing Nick off him. “But yeah, Subway sounds fine. Rotisserie chicken or teriyaki?”

“Mm... feeling the teriyaki. You wanna check if George is still here?” Nick asks.

“I mean, sure,” Clay says. “I think he said he didn’t have any money, right? Maybe we can buy him a sandwich or something. Wait. Why do you remember him still?”

“Hey, now don’t start spinning this story so I’m the one who looks like the creep,” Nick says. “*You’re* the one who remembered he didn’t have any money.”

Shit.

“Okay, fine, I guess I can come off like a creep too,” Clay huffs. “Anyways, where is he? Do you see him?”

The truck stop wasn’t that big, so it was easy to spot George-- still at the same spot he was at before, underneath the cantilevered roof. He had a notebook open, scribbling something down. Nick approaches, stopping awkwardly in front of George. The shadow cast down is noticeable enough that George raises his head, looks up at Nick.

“Oh, um. You’re Nick, right? I remember seeing you,” George says cheerfully-- Clay can’t help but notice it sounds like a forced cheerfulness. He closes the notebook, tucking it into a ratty backpack. Like most of what Clay notices about George, it seems worn and threadbare, only a second from falling apart. “What’s up?”

“Um. Do you wanna get lunch with me and Clay?” Nick asks.

Not smooth at all.

Clay chokes back a laugh.

“Oh, I don’t know,” George says awkwardly. “I couldn’t pay you back.” His stomach growls, though, loud enough for all of them to hear. George’s face flushes brightly, and he hides his face behind his sleeves. “Oh no,” he says, sounding muffled through the fabric.

“You don’t need to pay us back,” Clay says, stepping closer. “Like the coat-- it’s just a gift.”

George’s lips part, his tongue wetting his lips. He seems to mull it over, and he sighs.

“Fine,” George says. “Lead the way.”

iii.

“George, whole wheat is gross,” Nick says.

George shoots Nick a dirty look, rolling his eyes.

“You guys bought me lunch,” George whines. “So don’t just offer that and then judge my eating choices.” As he says this, he takes a bigger bite out of the footlong. As soon as Clay had set down the sandwiches, George had torn into his with the eagerness of a starving man. Clay’s willing to bet that George *hasn’t* eaten, and something about that makes his heart squeeze.

“Yeah, Nick, it’s a no-judgment zone. Even if whole wheat is the *worst* kind of bread out there, George doesn’t deserve to be judged for wanting to be healthy,” Clay says, taking a bite out of his sandwich.

George relaxes for a second before realizing exactly what Clay had said, and then throws a napkin at Clay’s face.

“That’s mean,” George says, pouting exaggeratedly. “How would you like it if I insulted your... Italian bread with teriyaki chicken on it? That’s two paradoxically different cultures clashing together, not to mention how unhealthy that is. Don’t you guys just sit in a truck all day and like... not *do* anything besides drive?”

“True,” Nick says, taking a bite out of a double chocolate chip cookie. “But I’ve got a fast metabolism. Clay puts on weight.”

“Hey,” Clay groans. “It’s on my thighs, and it’s not even that much weight. They just look a tiny bit chubbier. It shouldn’t even matter, you said you were a thigh kind of guy, right?”

“And what about it?” Nick goads, raising an eyebrow.

Clay sighs, taking a long sip of tea from his carton.

“Fuck you, man,” Clay says.

George unscrews the water bottle, taking a sip.

“I don’t mean to, like, assume or anything,” George says, “but are you two... a thing?”

“No,” Nick says immediately. “No way. This guy’s seen me naked in the truck stop showers, you think I’d let anyone like that become my boyfriend or whatever? I’m trying to save my chastity for marr--” Nick doesn’t get the luxury of finishing that sentence when Clay throws a fork straight at Nick’s face. “Hey, what the hell?”

“You’re *such* a bitchass liar,” Clay says. “All men do is lie! You told me you don’t even believe in marriage just a *while* ago, and now you’re gonna make me look weird in front of George!”

“Yeah, that’s because you’re such a *freak*, ” Nick teases. Clay huffs, taking a big bite out of his sandwich and chewing frustratedly to avoid swearing at Nick even more and making a bigger scene. After that, the previous bubbly energy dies out somewhat, the trio returning to quietly eating their meals.

Clay crumples the paper wrapping for the sandwich, tucking it inside the plastic Subway bag.

“You guys finished?” Clay asks, looking at Nick and George. Nick nods, wadding up the paper lining and throwing it into Clay’s hand. George hurries a little, finishes the last bite of his sandwich before folding up the paper lining neatly, handing it to Clay. “Alright, I’ll throw these out now, you guys just sit tight.”

It comes out instinctually-- as if George is already part of the trucking group.

Clay coughs.

“Or, well, George, if-if you want to leave, I won’t stop you.”

George nods a little but doesn’t move out of his seat.

Clay somehow feels encouraged by that.

By the time Clay returns from dumping the rest of the drinks that they won’t finish and the plastic bag containing all of the paper wrappings for the Subway sandwiches, George has somehow nodded off and is resting his head on Nick’s shoulder.

“Nick,” Clay says, scandalized. “What the hell.”

“Don’t ‘what the hell’ me, I’m not doing it on purpose!” Nick whispers, giving Clay a somewhat panicked look. “He kinda just, went lax in the seat and nearly banged his head against the table! I’m not risking him getting a concussion.”

“Now you realize we can’t just *leave* him here, right?” Clay says, propping his elbows on the table to look straight into Nick’s eyes. Nick flushes a little, turning his head up.

“Well yeah, I know,” Nick says. “I mean, would it be *that* bad?”

Clay’s lips part and he considers it for a second. As he’s about to answer, suddenly--

“Hi guys,” a voice calls. Both Clay and Nick startle a little, but Clay’s face suddenly lights up.

“Darryl!” Clay says, reaching out to clasp the man’s hand and give him a tight hug. “Good to see you, man! Where have you and Zak been on the road?”

“Oh, we’ve just been around. This is our last stop, actually-- so we’re gonna park here for the night before heading back to the apartment,” Darryl says, giving Clay a big smile. “I must say, it’s lovely to see you guys. How are you? Have you been well?”

“We’ve been doing great,” Clay says. “How about Zak?”

“He’s alright. He’s asleep in the truck right now, so I have to be heading back. I was just here to pick up some coffee. Do you guys have a new partner or something?” Darryl asks, gesturing to George who was still asleep on Nick’s shoulder.

“Yes,” Nick blurts out. “Yep, for sure. He’s a new driving partner.”

“Oh, three in one go? At least your truck has a lot of room,” Darryl says. Darryl slides his glasses up the bridge of his nose-- he doesn’t seem entirely convinced by Nick’s statement-- and to be entirely fair to Nick, Nick is a horrible liar and can barely keep anything off his face. He’s so easily read, just like an open book.

“Yeah, thank God,” Clay says awkwardly.

“Well, I’ll see you guys around. We should arrange some time to meet up and we can watch a movie at one of the stops,” Darryl says cheerfully, squeezing Clay in a tight hug before giving a nonchalant wave and walking off. “Good luck out on the road! I hear it’s a bit more slippery in winter.”

“Yeah, thanks. Stay safe,” Clay says, waving Darryl off. The man gives a grin, waving at Clay before leaving the small Subway. “Nick. Seriously? You’re just going to--”

“Heat of the moment. Don’t look at me like that! If we left him here, that would just make things worse,” Nick complains. “Come on, let’s just take him-- if he wants to be let off somewhere, then we can let him off then! We’re not kidnapping him-- we’re just...”

“Nick, honey, it doesn’t matter how you dice it. It looks like we’re kidnapping him.” Clay tries to

keep his voice at the lowest it can be, his voice coming out breathy and whispery because the last thing he wants right now is to be questioned by police.

“Alternatively, do you want him to wake up at this place all by himself?” Nick challenges.

Clay swallows.

It doesn’t seem fair to leave George by himself in a Subway.

“Okay, fine. You win. But if he tries to kill us, that’s on you.”

iv.

George feels warm.

He hears something rocking, the waves of musty heat from a heater of some kind, soft whispers.

That’s strange.

He opens his eyes, sits up a little. A blanket slides off him, and he blinks hard, trying to readjust to the darkness. It’s not entirely dark— if George had to guess, it was maybe around 5 or 6 PM. The sun was beginning to set.

He’s in... a truck?

George squints a little, seeing two people sitting in the front seats.

“Uh, hello?” George asks. In most cases, he’d be freaking out— but for some reason, the two people looked familiar enough. One of the people jolts, turning back. George’s mouth opens in a confused ‘o’ shape. “Nick?”

“Hi, George,” Nick says awkwardly. “You’re awake.”

“Yeah, I... what the hell?” George asks. His head throbs, and he pushes back his hair a little, but his bangs just fall right back onto his face. “Why did you guys...” He can’t finish his sentence. *Why did you guys take me with you? Instead of leaving me there? I would’ve been fine with it.*

“If you want to get out, just let us know,” Clay says as he flicks on the signal to change lanes. The yellowish light flickers on and off, on and off, the annoying insistent clicking making George only *slightly* irritated. “We’re not trying to kidnap you.”

“No, that’s like, the least of my concerns...” George murmurs. He realizes that the two have brought his pack in with them, and he reaches to clutch it to his chest.

“Do you have anywhere to go? That friend you mentioned— could they...” Nick cocks his head at George. His eyes, dark and narrowed, peering into George. George has half a mind to squirm a little under Nick’s scrutiny— it’s like Nick already knows that George doesn’t have an actual location he’s heading to.

George swallows.

“There... there isn’t anywhere,” George says quietly. He feels a lump rising in his throat, and he tries to force it down, swallowing. He’s not going to cry. He’s not going to just overshare everything like he usually does, stupid, *stupid* him— “I don’t have... anywhere to go.”

You’re pathetic.

George reaches up to wipe at his eyes a little.

Nick looks like he’s regretted asking George anything at all.

“I’m not a porcelain doll,” George blurts out. “I’m not fragile or anything. I’m *fine*.” He wills himself to believe it, tries to affect a look that shows Nick just how fine he’s feeling— but he slumps his shoulders and puts his face into his hands, a tired sob leaving his lips.

“George,” Nick says softly. There’s the *click* of a seat belt unbuckling and the annoying *ding-ding-ding* as the sensor signals that there’s a passenger without their seatbelt— and then the small cot gives underneath more weight, and George feels a hand pressed to his shoulder, warm and comforting.

“Stop,” George says, not showing his face. Nick draws his hand away, but says, voice lowered now,

“Clay and I are going to be on the road for a long while— if you want to come along, you can, alright? And if at any point you want to leave or be dropped off, all you have to do is say the word.” Nick doesn’t touch George again, which George is secretly grateful for. “Oh, and, um... you don’t have to come up with your answer right now. If you just want to stick around for a bit, that’s okay too. There’s a spare toothbrush, and um... you can probably sleep in the bed with us, it’s a pull-out kind of thing, so we can always make more room on it--”

“No, I should sleep on the ground. I’m taking up your space, you shouldn’t have to accommodate--” George blurts out, but Nick bats that aside.

“No, George. We’re the ones who took you, so we at least should give you a bed,” Nick says firmly. “Clay’s a pretty big guy, so he can sleep up front. Right?”

Clay makes a noise of assent, but George feels a horrible twinge of guilt.

“I couldn’t,” George says. “I-I just, it doesn’t feel right for me to hog so much room, and you guys have been so kind, and—”

“George,” Nick breathes out. “Dude, it’s okay. We don’t mind.”

“But you don’t even *know* me,” George says. “Y-you just, took me away when I didn’t even ask for it, and now you’re just trying to act like my friend when we’re absolute strangers. That’s— that’s not fair to me at all...!”

“Yeah. You’re right. It isn’t,” Nick murmurs, pushing his hair back. “But... I just, I’m not trying to be a hero here. You just...” Nick sighs, slumping his shoulders. “It wouldn’t have been right. To leave you alone.”

George swallows.

“You can’t just... *decide* things like that,” George says weakly.

“Sorry,” Nick says. He ducks his head, seemingly apologetic. George doesn’t know Nick too well, but he gets the impression that it’s very hard for him to hide his feelings. He’s being genuine, at least in this moment.

Oh, how awkward. How horribly awkward this all was.

“It’s... it’s fine. I’m just tired, I didn’t really get much sleep yesterday,” George says. “Um... you can go back to the front if-if you need to.”

Nick nods, getting up. The absence is immediately noticeable, and George feels the fleeting sense of loss before he shoves it back down, and he hears Nick sit back down in the front. He doesn’t hear any talking. He wonders if Nick and Clay are remaining silent for his sake— hot tears threaten to breach, *he doesn’t deserve it, doesn’t deserve their kindness for someone they don’t even know—*

He squeezes his eyes shut.

He doesn’t know whether he sleeps or not.

But he hears the creak of the truck, the soft hum of the engine dying down. He hears the clicks of seatbelts being undone, a soft tired groan from Nick and a light wheezing chuckle from Clay.

“George,” George hears Clay’s voice, soft and distant. George groans a little, rolling to face up in the bed. He sees Clay’s face, noting a small grin on the man’s face in the dim light. “George, don’t be like that. We’re bunking down for the night, you’ll have to get up so we can pull the bed out a little more. There’s a small nook over there where you can brush your teeth... if you need to shower, we can do that tomorrow, but—”

“... okay,” George says, slowly sitting up in the bed and rising to his feet, shrugging his— Clay’s— coat higher on his shoulders. As Clay busies himself with pulling the truck’s bed farther out into the space, George gropes around for a light switch— he finds it, and a soft ambient glow lights up in front of his face. A dark and hazy yellow light.

George finds the toothpaste easily enough— a nearly *entirely* flattened tube— George lifts it up, glancing at Nick, who laughs a little.

“Sorry, that one’s on me,” Nick says. “I think there’s a spare toothbrush in the cupboard.”

George opens up the small cupboard in the nook— he finds one blue toothbrush still in its plastic packaging amongst half-empty shampoo bottles and crumpled paper towels. He wets the toothbrush, starts to scrub thoroughly at his teeth. Nick soon comes to brush as well, exchanging a look with George before his nose scrunches and he begins to giggle, his shoulders trembling with the effort.

“What’s so funny,” George says through a mouthful of toothpaste.

“Oh, nothing. I just... I can’t believe you’re taking this so coolly,” Nick says as he spits into the sink. “We literally *kidnapped* you—”

“Well, I started crying in the back of the truck. I don’t think that’s what *you’d* call ‘taking this so coolly,’” George laughs, spitting into the sink as well. Nick sighs, looking into the nook’s mirror. Nick pulls the bandana wrapped around his forehead down, his dark hair cascading around his face.

“I’d be doin’ worse,” Nick says earnestly. “So I think you’re pretty cool, George.”

George flushes a little. He feels something warm tingling in his chest, tries to shove it down.

“Uh. Thanks?”

“Alright, *Simpnap*, come check if the bed’s comfy and turn on the lights in there,” Clay calls.

“Hey, I haven’t washed my face yet,” Nick complains.

“No, but I don’t think George needs to see you *simping*, ” Clay says. “Come over here and arrange the pillows.”

Nick complains and groans the entire time, but does as Clay asks with a dutiful hand. George sees Clay approach from the mirror, and Clay picks up a dark yellow toothbrush— green, maybe? He isn’t too sure whether Clay’s dark yellow coat is a fashion statement or if it’s his color blindness. Probably the latter.

“Sorry about this,” Clay says.

“What do you have to apologize for?” George asks.

“I heard what you said to Nick. You’re right, you know. We took you out of a place without really asking you about your situation. We shouldn’t have been just... making those decisions for you,” Clay says finally, peering at George. George looks up, swallowing a little.

“It’s okay,” George murmurs.

“Look, George, I don’t want you just—”

“You don’t know me, alright? And I say, out of my own free will, that I’m okay with this. I didn’t have a place to sleep, I’ll be honest. Or anything to eat. I’m out of money, and I’d probably have ended up starving to death. It’s fine,” George forces the words out of his mouth. They taste like glue. Sticky, cloying.

Clay furrows his brow.

But thankfully, he doesn’t say more. George doesn’t know what he’d do if Clay tried to say more.

“Do you need pajamas? You can borrow one of mine or Nick’s— they’re in the drawer under the bed. Um... we can help you get some more supplies later, since we also need to stock up,” Clay says.

“Uh... thank you,” George murmurs.

“No problem, man.” Clay squeezes out a dollop of toothpaste onto his brush, and begins scrubbing away dutifully. “Go check on Nick, I think he’s a bit grumpy.”

“Okay,” George says easily enough, pulling away from the mini bathroom nook. The bed he had been lying on was now illuminated— a gentle, warm yellow light lights up the bed’s backboard

and Nick is currently adjusting some pillows and pulling out a longer comforter.

“Hey,” Nick says. “Uh, I dunno where you wanna sleep, but—”

“I can sleep on the edge,” George says immediately.

“Oh, um. Alright, if you’re sure.” Nick pulls out a thinner blanket, conveniently draping it across the farther edge. “I’m gonna go wash my face.” He brushes past George, heading for the small nook where it seemed Clay now had a small bottle of what appeared to be some kind of moisturizer serum— did these guys care super deeply about skincare? Truckers didn’t seem like the types to care about whatever condition their skin was in...

George sits down on the mattress, unbuttoning Clay’s jacket and shrugging it somewhere on the ground where a small pile of clothes was— and then he remembered Clay offering up his or Nick’s clothes. He crouches down, checking underneath the mattress— his eyes lock on a dresser, and he reaches a shaky hand to pull it open.

It’s way harder than he thinks it should be.

But eventually the dresser comes open, and his jaw gapes a little.

How many fucking clothes do these guys have?!

He has to give it to them, though— it’s pretty organized. Stuffed to the brim, yes, but organized. George recognizes it vaguely— was that the Marie Kondo way of organizing clothes? Folding it into thirds... he shrugs a little, picking out a grey t-shirt. He pulls it open, and realizes it’s probably Clay’s, given how big it is.

He shrugs off his hoodie and undershirt, shivering a little at the cold before pulling on Clay’s shirt. It smells somewhat like the road— a strange combination of gasoline and aftershave.

But at this point, George can’t find it in himself to care. Anything’s better than the same clothes he’s been wearing. He doesn’t take off his pants, though. It’d be a bit awkward to be in his boxers around two guys he doesn’t even know— as much as he’s already so willing to trust them. He peels off his socks, flexing his toes a little, and waits.

Eventually, Nick comes clamoring back.

“Oh, I see you’ve found our clothing storage,” Nick says. “Sorry about the mess, uh— we buy a lot of clothes.”

“Don’t group us together,” Clay says. “You’re the one who burns through our paychecks on off-white Supreme hoodies. They literally all look the same, and we could make the same thing with an iron and transfer paper.”

“No, come on, don’t do me like that. I refuse to go trucking without being stylish,” Nick pouts. “George’s gonna think I’m a snob who only cares about brand names.”

“Oh, and you’re not? Alright,” Clay chortles, shucking off his coat and throwing it onto the pile where George had placed the rest of his clothes. “I’ll be changing now, so if you guys would care to avert your eyes...”

“You just don’t want George looking at your stomach,” Nick says. “Not like there’s anything to look at, you don’t have abs.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Clay says with a smirk, but he turns away from Nick and George to take off his hoodie. He pulls off his pants with practiced efficiency— George can’t help but notice the fact he’s wearing one of those heat-based leggings underneath his jeans. “What are you looking at, George?”

George startles a little.

“Uh, you wear... two sets of pants?” George asks, gesturing.

“Gets cold,” Clay says. “Plus it wastes a lot of gas to keep the heater on really high.” Clay sits down on the bed, moving towards the further edge against the wall. “Nick, hurry up. We gotta be up early tomorrow.”

“Don’t rush me,” Nick complains, but he’s already climbing into bed, snugly occupying the middle. “Night, George.”

“Night, George,” Clay echoes.

George sighs, tucking himself into the covers.

“Goodnight,” he murmurs.

V.

George is alone in the bed when he wakes.

The bed isn't *cold* , but he still feels a sense of loss.

“George, you up?” Nick's voice is at a whisper. “Clay brought breakfast.”

“Oh,” George says, sitting up. He blinks the sleep out of his eyes as best as he can. “Yeah, I'm up...”

“Clay, close the door, it's co- OH MY GOD,” Nick screams as Clay presses a hand against the back of Nick's neck. “CLAY!”

“Gotcha,” Clay says smugly.

“You *bitch!* ” Nick cries. “You're gonna make me freeze to death, you monster. I hope that's what you want.”

“No,” Clay says, and it's this strange, throaty sort of sincerity that makes George think he's watching something far too intimate. It almost makes him want to pull his gaze from the two. “No, Nick. I really don't want you to freeze to death.”

“Well, you sure don't seem to match that sincerity with your actions, you dick.”

Nick seems like a bit of an idiot.

“What’s in the bag?” George asks suddenly. Clay snaps out of whatever reverie he was floating in, flushing a little.

“Bagels,” Clay says. “I got cream cheese if you want it, but I eat mine with butter.” In the dim morning light, George can barely see Clay— but he gets a flash of the dark yellow coat he wears, as well as a yellow and white trucker hat— oh, but it—

“Your coat’s green, right?” George asks.

“Uh, yeah,” Clay says. “Why did you ask?”

“Looks yellow to me,” George says. “But then I realized having an ugly yellow coat probably isn’t your fashion sense. Or it might be, I dunno. You guys are weird.”

Clay’s eyes squeeze shut as he falls forward, a breathless laugh leaving his lips. His body *racks* with it, and George almost winces because the laugh sounds painfully forced out of Clay’s lungs.

“Yeah, uh,” Clay says between gasps, “no, it’s definitely green, George. I didn’t think you’d… wow, that was *blunt*. ” He calms down a little, broad shoulders still quavering with the effort of keeping still. “You’re colorblind?”

“Yeah,” George says.

Clay hums.

“Cool,” Clay says. “Anyways, uh, you should probably eat. We’ll be driving all day. Me and Nick tend to avoid stopping for lunch, but I think we need to get you some better equipment so we’ll find a stop to restock and stuff like that.”

“You really don’t--”

“George,” Clay says. “I want you to make a promise to yourself-- not because we’re asking you, but because you believe it-- that it’s alright for you to get things. That it’s okay for you to... relax around us.”

“I’m relaxed,” George says.

Nick squeezes at George’s shoulders, and suddenly George squeaks, a horrible throb of pain shooting up his neck.

“No you’re not,” Nick teases a little. “You’re all tense.” His face morphs into a more serious expression as he sits down, takes a sesame seed bagel from the bag. George frowns a little, peering into Clay’s bag. There’s a mixture of bagels, *way* more than enough bagels for just three people--

“Why are there so many?” George asks.

“Uh, you know. I eat a lot,” Clay says. George doesn’t doubt that it isn’t true, but something about the way Clay looks away, slightly sheepish-- he’s lying a bit. He got so many because he wasn’t sure what George liked. George grins a little, picking out a plain bagel from the mix.

“Sure,” George murmurs, splitting it open with his hands and picking out one of the small packets of cream cheese. His stomach rumbles a little-- he vaguely remembers not eating dinner-- he was so tired, he must have slept through it. He smears a generous dollop of the cream cheese onto the bagel, biting down on it. It’s warm. He doesn’t remember the last time he’s had warm food consecutively-- the sandwich he had yesterday was warm, too. And a bit crunchy.

The three eat in silence on the bed.

The silence somehow isn’t awkward. It’s a bit warm, reassuring.

Somewhere, nestled deep inside George’s brain, he thinks, *This isn’t so bad.*

If it was just like this, I think I could do it.

Spend my time on the road.

But you don't deserve it, George.

Once they realize how weak you are, they're not going to want you to stay with them.

All you ever do is run away from your problems. You don't ever face them head on.

You stick close, because you don't want to be left out.

But you stay far away, so you don't get hurt.

Don't delude yourself into thinking that anyone wants that as a friend.

The bagel feels like glue in his mouth, and he looks down at it. He squints a little, struggling to keep looking-- before he suddenly realizes his hand's trembling. Color blurs together, and he feels so cold.

So alone.

"George."

Nick's voice sounds far away.

"George!"

Sharp, horrible clarity. Nick's hand is on his, an index finger rubbing at his wrist.

George squeaks out, whipping his hand away from Nick's as if branded with a hot iron. He doesn't miss Nick's face furrowing with a barely-hidden expression of hurt, and George feels a hot iron of guilt twisting at his gut. It churns there, its ever present heat reminding him he's *fucked up*, yet *again--*

“Sorry,” George whispers. “I don’t-- I don’t know what came over me.”

“Don’t apologize,” Nick says finally. “I get it.” And something, *something* about Nick’s face-- its set resoluteness, the furrow of his brow-- that makes George realize it wasn’t hurt on Nick’s face, but rather, *concern* . And a strange sense of knowing.

Clay clears his throat, and George snaps his gaze around to look at Clay.

“Just keep eating,” Clay says. His gaze, too, has a strange sense of *knowing* . Something about it makes George feel like he’s being pitied, like he’s being looked at through a lens.

The bagel still tastes like glue.

But George takes another bite, swallows.

It’s better, if ever so slightly.

vi.

Here’s a secret.

Nick isn’t good at dealing with personal shit.

He doesn’t really address his personal problems, since his own facade of the happy moodmaker won’t let him deal with his own problems.

Well, there are times where Clay looks like he wants to say something. Wants to reach out his hand, pull Nick’s head close to his chest and let Nick just *let it out* . But whether it’s restraint or sadness, Clay never takes initiative.

Nick doesn’t wish that Clay would.

He really doesn't.

"You want the first drive?"

Nick looks up to see Clay dangling the keys in front of Nick's face, similar to how you'd dangle shiny things in front of a baby.

"Sure," Nick says easily, taking the keys.

"You've been sitting out here for a while. What's up with that?" Clay asks.

Nick had finished his breakfast early and stepped out of the cab altogether— he'd claimed it was for the fresh air, and George seemed too embroiled in his own head to tell Nick not to go, but Clay had narrowed his eyes and given an uneasy 'alright'. Nick knows he can hide and lie all he wants— but Clay usually knew when he lied.

"I feel like," Nick pauses. Trying to take inventory of his feelings is hard, especially when it feels like they've been jumbled up in a blender. "George isn't telling us something, and he's clearly... pretty badly affected. I want to know, but... would I be forcing him to say something he didn't want to tell us? Is it selfish of me to want to know?"

"Well, I think when George's ready to say it, he will. Until then, we can't pretend to know how he's feeling. And, besides. We're all a little selfish. We took him, right? Pretty selfish-sounding to me." Clay grins a little.

"You only took him because he reminds you of *me*, dumbass," Nick says.

"What? Don't give me that. You're projecting yourself onto me." Clay waves a hand. "You saw him, you felt bad about leaving him alone because you remembered the motel lobby."

Nick remembers it clearly.

He'd been a stray, just like George. Maybe a little better for wear, not nearly as pushed to the brink as George, but he hadn't had anywhere to go. Clay had found him, then. A fellow stray meeting a

fellow stray in a ratty motel lobby, with Nick and a backpack and a plastic raincoat barely covering his frame, and Clay, who had barely grown into a growth spurt and was still horribly, worriedly awkward. Clay had offered Nick the chance to go on his truck, and Nick had latched onto the hook that Clay had thrown at him and had never, ever let go.

“Now you’re projecting,” Nick grumbles.

“Look, fine. We can both project together,” Clay says, not even an apologetic tone in his voice.

Nick sighs.

“Look, let’s just get driving. I want out of this hell state before lunch. Let’s stop by that KBBQ place we were at last time we took this route,” Nick says resolutely.

“Wait, the one you... nearly triggered the fire alarm in?” Clay asks. “Didn’t they like, ban us from coming back--”

“Look, it’s three people instead of two, so I think it’s going to be fine.”

It isn’t, but Nick wants to at least pretend.

But Clay gives him the *look*, the look he’s always given Nick-- that strange mixture of fondness and longing, and Nick’s not even sure Clay knows he gives Nick that look-- and he says,

“Alright, whatever you say.”

Because Nick knows that Clay has always bent for him. Like his namesake, just a little water and it’s enough to push a little dent into clay that hasn’t dried out entirely.

“I’m giving you the aux cord, you better not play trash,” Nick says. “Especially not in front of George.”

“I don’t play trash,” Clay says in mock offense, scrolling through his phone.

“Your driving playlist is full of songs from the 90s. Or lo-fi. Or some weird mixture of both.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. The 90s has banger music,” Clay says. “Anyways, I’ll just put on the lo-fi. George, you alright there?”

George is currently huddled in blankets. Nick had taken George’s temperature right after breakfast - he’d seemed a bit hot, maybe a slight bit feverish-- and while the temperature reading had come up slightly higher than body temperature (not enough to be dangerous, but Nick was a worrywart and didn’t want George dying on them), Nick isn’t planning on taking chances.

“‘M good. Is this really necessary?” George asks. The man’s voice is already thick with sleep, and Nick rolls his eyes.

“I’m just being careful. Last thing you want to do is be super sick on a truck. Believe me, I got sick once and Clay wouldn’t stop fretting over me. *Nick, do you want soup? Nick, let me check your temperature. Nick, if you need to throw up, I really won’t mind if you do it on the upholstery.* God, give me a break,” Nick laughs, rolling his eyes in mock annoyance. He pulls the truck into reverse, checking into the rearview mirrors before slowly pulling out of the parking spot.

“I didn’t let you throw up on the upholstery. Shit’s expensive, Nick.” Clay flicks through his playlist, picking out a soft lo-fi tune. Nick immediately recognizes it as Kyoto, a song that Clay frequently played.

“That’s not what you said when I was delirious,” Nick says.

“How do you even know what I said? You said it yourself, you were *delirious*. God, I could’ve said anything, like ‘I love you’ or something like that and you probably forgot it,” Clay says.

Nick tries not to think about Clay’s choice of words.

“You’re gross,” is what Nick resolutely says instead. “Pull up the GPS.”

“Do you even need it?” Clay wrinkles his nose.

“Yesn’t,” Nick responds. “I’d just like to be careful.”

George giggles.

It’s a warm, bright sound— but Nick can’t help but think it isn’t all the way there. Like a coloring sheet that has only been half filled, a cup half empty. Or half full. Nick thinks that trying to piece together someone’s life motto by asking them what they think of a cup is stupid.

“Having fun there?” Nick asks.

George sniffs— it sounds stuffed, and while it isn’t conclusive proof that George might be feverish, it doesn’t quell Nick’s worries at the moment.

“Mm,” George murmurs. “I think I’m still tired. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Nick is... well aware that George didn’t get any sleep. He had been so tense that even Nick had been affected by it. George had been pulled taut, like a rope nearly about to break. George had only nodded off when it was approaching morning, and by then Nick and Clay needed to get up and prep the truck, get breakfast, ad nauseum.

“Get some rest,” Nick says softly.

George murmurs a noise of assent, lying back down.

“You want me to go check on him?” Clay asks quietly, setting up Google Maps.

“If you want,” Nick says, merging onto the highway. In a cheery voice, Google Maps reports that it will take up to twenty miles before he has to pull off the highway and go on a different route. It’s easier to let his mind drift as he drives on the highway— while he knows that he probably *shouldn’t* drift, for fear that he ends up crashing into a smaller car, but it doesn’t happen.

Clay turns his head back.

“George, do you need me to babysit you?” Clay asks, sing-song.

George makes a dissenting noise.

“No,” George says. “I think Nick will get lonely if you don’t stay there with him. If I roll off the bed, you can just strap me back in. Now leave me alone.” George’s voice takes on a whinier cadence, and Nick’s lips curve up a little. He can almost see George’s face screwing up with mock annoyance.

“Okay, okay,” Clay says in mock offense, but so clearly exaggerated in a way where it’s clear he really isn’t mad at all. “If it’s such a bother then I won’t.”

“Yeah, dummy. You’re bothering me,” George says, his voice slower now.

It’s a testament to just how tired George is, because he doesn’t continue snarking off. Instead, there is the soft, quiet sound of his breathing. And Nick turns away to focus on the road. He’s always envied how casual Clay is on the road— it’s a strange kind of casual bordering on reckless, but Clay always gets them to their destination.

“I think we should buy him a blue coat,” Clay says.

“Blue?” Nick asks.

“Blue,” Clay affirms. “I think he’d look nice in blue.”

“Sounds kind of like you’ve been ogling him,” Nick says teasingly.

“Whaaat? No, don’t be weird about that,” Clay stammers. “I’m not. God, you’re giving me that shit-eating look. Stop.” There’s something special, Nick thinks, about the way only he’s able to push Clay to the brink of embarrassment. In most cases, Clay is impenetrable, a solid rock to Nick’s frail flint and steel. But sometimes, Nick pushes a little, and Clay cracks.

“I don’t mind, you know.” But that’s a lie, isn’t it? Nick does mind. He minds, if the slightest bit. It’s not up to him to dictate who Clay looks at, who Clay spends his time around— but Clay spends all of his time around *Nick*. Is it so selfish for him to want Clay’s eyes on him, all the time? Looking at him like he does now, fond and so, *so* soft? Is it selfish for him to want that look that Clay’s giving him, where he parts his lips and gives Nick the softest smile *ever* — is it selfish to want that look kept in a jar, preserved forever?

Maybe.

It probably is.

He’s being stupid.

“Yeah?” Clay’s voice goes lower.

Nick flushes.

“ *You’re* making it weird.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You’re looking at me like that,” Nick says, raising his hands to squeeze at the wheel tightly.

“How?”

Clay sounds curious. Like he doesn’t actually know what he *does* to Nick. And he might not— Clay’s security and sureness in himself makes him the dumbest man alive sometimes. Nick sometimes envies it— how nice it is, for Clay not to have to sit back and question what he’s doing, if he’s making other people uncomfortable, how other people think about him— because as far as Clay’s concerned, he’s himself. Just him. It can’t be that way for Nick. For Nick, it’s not just him. It’s him and Clay and Darryl and Zak and Schlatt and Alex and everyone they’ve ever met, and now *George*. They swim in his head, and he revisits memories of the stupid things he’s done, the things he’s said— the things he wishes he could bury underneath a steel-toed boot. He wishes he

could stamp out that quivering insecurity as easily as he could crush a spider underneath his foot.

“Like it’s just you and me out there,” Nick murmurs. “And I’m the only one that matters.”

Clay laughs.

It sounds sadder than usual.

“Sometimes I wish it was,” Clay says. “But I’ve spent too much of my life looking back on things that I can’t change. There *can’t* be a ‘what if’, because the time I spend on ‘what if’ will take away from what matters most.” Clay doesn’t specify what matters to him, but Nick has the general idea.

(The road, maybe Nick, and maybe his sister.)

“I get that,” Nick says. “Keep the things you love closer, instead of the things you hate.”

“Yeah,” Clay says easily. “Like you.”

Nick’s heart squeezes.

“You’ve seen me at my worst, Clay. Rock bottom and then maybe then some. I don’t know how you could still...” *How anyone could still love that.*

“You saw me at my worst, too. We’re friends. I gotta be honest, if you gave me bad vibes I wouldn’t have bothered to stay with you for as long as I have,” Clay says, reaching over the dash to rub his knuckles over Nick’s hair. “God, your hair’s oily as hell, Nick. You’re going to have to shower soon.”

“Ugh, as if you don’t need a shower too,” Nick grumbles.

Clay wheezes a little, throwing his head back in raucous laughter.

“I do, I do. Your hair just— it’s so thin,” he wheezes. “You don’t shower for like, a *day* and then your hair turns greasier than an *oil vat* ...!”

“No, it’s not! Maybe a little thinner than yours, but like— god, you’re bullying me. This is HIB, I’m so gonna get you fired for this.” Nick squeezes the handles of the steering wheel. “Techno already lowballed us on our paychecks. He paid us back later, but that’s not the point. I’m out here, with a crazy *bully* of a truck mate and a guy we kidnapped in the back of our truck. That’s gotta be some work violation. I’m totally going to be fired, no, *you* and *I* will both get fired and we’ll have to sell everything we own, and—“

Clay’s shoulders shake with laughter, tears escaping his eyes.

“Nick, stop, st- *ooop* , you’re gonna make me pass out,” Clay cackles, barely able to breathe.

“Fuck you, because you deserve it,” Nick says finally. He gives Clay a glance, and the look of humorous terror on Clay’s face nearly sends Nick into a spiral of laughter as well.

“You wouldn’t actually try to do that, would you?” Clay says finally as his shoulders stop trembling.

“What?” Nick asks. “Fuck you?”

“God, *what* ? No... like, try to kill me,” Clay sputters out, the flush on his cheeks growing higher to the point where it turns the tips of his ears a dusty, rosy red.

“No,” Nick says. “I wouldn’t.” He pauses, wonders if he should say anything else. “You mean a lot to me. I’d be miserable if you died, despite me saying that I hate you and all of that.”

A small smile forms on Clay’s face, more sincere than the laughing expression he’d just had.

“I wanted a weird, casual answer, but I think I’ll take this one,” Clay says with a grin.

“You tricked me,” Nick says without much venom to his voice.

“Me? Trick you? Never. That was an answer you gave me freely,” Clay says. “Feel free to be more sincere. It’s kind of cute.”

Cute.

“You’re being so bold for a guy who’s so dumb,” Nick grumbles.

“Me? Dumb? No way. You’re dumber, *Sapnap*. Like that nickname you gave yourself. That’s peak dumb energy,” Clay says.

“Better than *Dream*, I think. That’s not even creative. That’s just a word.”

Nick flicks on the signal to change lanes.

Before Nick had given Clay his name, he had said his name was Sapnap.

(*“There’s no way that’s a real name,” Clay said.*

“Well, it is, and it’s mine,” Nick said, scowling at Clay while taking a big bite out of a honey bun. It’s warm. He doesn’t remember the last time he had something warm to chew on.

“Well then, Sapnap, my name’s Dream,” Clay had said to him. His face screwed up into a laugh, but he shook his head. “Nah, I can’t bother to lie like that. It’s just dumb. I’m Clay. Give me your real name, come on. There’s no way any self-respecting parent would’ve named you Sapnap.”

“Well, my parents didn’t respect themselves that much.” Or me.

“... Sorry. I should’ve--”

“Nick.”

“What?”

“That’s my name. I’m Nick.”

“... Nice to meet you, Nick.”)

That’s how it started and ended. Like the Ten of Swords, reversed-- an end to the pain he’d been running away from, the opening to a new beginning. Like a prelude.

And Nick *has* been happy.

And he selfishly, *selfishly* wants more.

But in the meantime, he keeps his eyes on the road.

vii.

“George.”

George gives a sleepy groan.

Bright light explodes behind his eyelids. Now that he’s aware of it, he wants badly to open his eyes, but for now he still won’t.

“George, come on. Don’t give me that.”

It’s Clay.

“No,” George says petulantly.

“Alright, if you’re gonna be like that...”

FUCK!

Suddenly, freezing, *freezing* hands are at the sides of his chest. The cold shoots through his veins, like novocaine or some kind of horrible medication that freezes his blood into pure *ice* . His eyes fly open, and he hears Clay laugh and pull his hands out from underneath George's shirt. What a fucking bastard. He's not sure whether he wants to punch Clay's lights out or *what* ; as George tries to blink the sleep from his eyes, his vision focuses on Clay's giggling face, the smattering of freckles across his nose more prominent today. Or maybe it's because George is looking more carefully.

"What the fuck," George gets out through a hoarse voice.

"It worked, didn't it? Blame Nick," Clay says immediately. "Nick was the one who came up with it."

"No, don't believe him. Clay's a liar," Nick says immediately. George just then notices that Nick is still in the driver's seat.

"Why'd you wake me up, anyway?" George murmurs.

"In all seriousness, Nick wanted me to check your temperature," Clay says. "We're stopping for lunch soon."

"Oh." George looks down at his hands. "Um, you can go ahead and do that."

Clay reaches out across the space between them, rests the back of his knuckles on George's forehead. He hums a little, brushing a finger over George's eyelid before pressing a finger of his own to his eyelid.

"You feel fine. It was probably just a temporary thing, but if you really weren't feeling well me and Nick would've just gone into the restaurant to pick something up and leave. It's not really safe to leave a sick person in the truck, anyway," Clay says. "But since your temperature's alright, I think you can come. How do you feel, anyways?"

"... better rested than I have in months," George responds honestly. "I was out like a rock, wasn't I?"

Clay nods.

George stretches a little, lets his arms drop. “So we’re stopping for lunch, right? Feels like yesterday when... oh.”

“Yeah,” Clay laughs, a flush forming higher on his cheeks. Clay fiddles with his fingers for a second-- George isn’t even quite sure what Clay is trying to do before Clay stammers out, “Well, you should probably get changed. I woke you up like, maybe ten minutes before we’re arriving at the restaurant so you’d get a bit of time to make yourself decent.”

George nods in assent.

“Thanks, Clay,” George says. “I’ll... go change now.”

Clay nods, getting up and returning to the front seat. Whatever conversation Nick and Clay had been having, they returned to it in soft voices. George finds his pile of clothes having been organized as neatly as possible— he doesn’t change out of the borrowed shirt, but he shrugs his blue hoodie over it, followed by Clay’s coat.

I shouldn’t be getting attached to it, George thinks, zipping it up as high as it can go. But it’s a good coat, and the winter is bitter.

That’s right.

That’s the logic he’s going to use to justify this.

That it’s a good coat, and the last thing Clay or Nick wanted for him was to let him freeze to death.

George leans down to lace his sneakers together in deft movements, eyeing the other shoes organized in the cubby. Large combat boots neatly folded in half, a pair of chunky white sneakers (somehow perfectly spotless, George doesn’t doubt that it’s Nick’s pair), a ratty pair of yellow sneakers (for sure these are Clay’s— they have weird smiley face decals all over them), and two pairs of Timberlands.

Typical trucker fare, George assumes.

He adjusts his hair in the mirror, tufting it up.

He really wants to shower.

“I’m good,” George calls down to the front.

Nick hums, putting a thumbs up into the air.

“We’ll be there soon. Sit tight.”

And so George does.

George has never had Korean barbecue before.

So when Clay describes it to him as basically a self-contained cookout at a dinner table, he’s a little daunted.

“But can’t things catch on fire?” George asks.

“Ha, about that...” Nick says in an embarrassed tone, “Uh... I... yeah.”

“Wait, you set--”

“No, no I didn’t! I just... nearly triggered the fire alarm with the smoke. And-and... yeah, we got... banned.” Nick rubs at the back of his neck, a flush forming on his cheeks.

“Wait, what? You got *banned* ? Wait, how are we going to be allowed back into the restaurant if

you got *banned* ?!” George says, his voice increasingly growing louder with his distress. Clay puts his hand on George’s shoulder, a soft *shhh* leaving his lips.

“Nick’s bold idea here,” Clay says with a lilt to his voice, “is that since they’re looking for two people who have been banned from the restaurant, they probably won’t look at us twice because there’s three of us. I think it’s a batshit stupid idea, not going to lie-- but it might work. Depends on how tired the waitstaff is.”

George doesn’t believe it’s going to work.

It shouldn’t.

By all accounts, it *shouldn’t* .

And it somehow fucking works.

The staff doesn’t look at them twice, and now they’re in the restaurant. Clay sits closest to the stove. Nick is forced to sit next to George, on the outside edge where you’d be able to swing your legs out to leave.

“Pick anything you want, George,” Clay says. “We’ll pay for it, and don’t worry about paying back.” It does nothing to assuage the insecurity George feels bubbling up in his chest, but he sighs and looks through the menu, picking out the smallest portion of meat that seems like a good cut. Nick and Clay each pick out something *way* bigger-- truckers’ portions, George is assuming. Nick breaks open the wooden chopsticks deftly, scraping them against each other to remove the splinters.

“George, want me to help you with that?” Nick asks.

George is...

Struggling a little.

He feels hot, prickling embarrassment flooding him as he finally, *finally* manages to pull the annoying bastards apart. They come out uneven, of *course* they do, and Nick gives George a smile. It’s a weird smile-- like a mixed cocktail of pity and mockery.

“Do you want my chopsticks?” Nick asks.

“No.”

George is blunt about it, but he needs to really jerk his eyes away from Nick’s perfectly split chopsticks.

When one of the waitstaff comes over with the meat, George struggles to keep his mouth closed all the way. It’s more meat than he’s ever seen in his life-- but the way Clay and Nick aren’t even fazed by it just proves to him that these two have monster diets. For sure. Nick picks up the scissors on the plate and begins snipping, throwing sizable chunks of meat onto the grill. Clay keeps a careful eye, flipping them when he feels like they’re ready.

“George, you want first dibs?” Clay asks.

George shrugs.

“I’m okay with whatever,” George says.

“Geooorge, being okay with *whatever* is the hardest thing,” Clay bemoans. “Alright, whatever. Say ‘aah.’” George opens his mouth obediently, and then just like that, Clay puts a piece of the barbecue into George’s mouth. George squeaks a little, pressing a hand to his mouth as the feeling of *hot* suddenly blooms on his tongue.

“Oh, shit. Did I burn your tongue?” Clay asks.

“No,” George muffles out. “No, it’s good, I just-- you caught me off guard.”

It is good. He can’t remember the last time he’s had meat like this-- maybe with-- *No. Stop, don’t think about them. Don’t remember them. You’ll just feel worse* -- but it’s welcome now, and it warms his belly.

Nick grins brightly at George through a mouthful of rice, almost fond. Something about that look makes George's heart squeeze, and butterflies rise to his stomach. It's not that he doesn't *want* the attention (he does, he most certainly does-- who's he kidding?) but... there's a bubbling, painful feeling blooming in his ribcage, the idea that he could ever be *desirable* by anyone...

George pushes Nick's head roughly with a hand.

"Ow, George, what the hell," Nick says with a dramatic pout.

"Close your mouth when you chew, that's disgusting," George says with no real venom to his voice.

"Sorry," Nick says after swallowing. "You just..."

"I just what?" George asks.

"No, nothing."

"Clearly isn't nothing," George grumbles.

"No, it really isn't!" Nick furrows his brow, jutting out his front lip. "You don't believe me, George?"

"I mean," George mumbles. "You might just be lying to me secretly and talking about it behind my back. I dunno." Shit. Pull back from that, George. You don't want to go into that. George tries to follow what his mind says, tries not to spill out all his dirty secrets over a Korean barbecue outing.

Nick looks... concerned.

"George, um, if-if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine... but just know me and Clay aren't going anywhere."

Of course you aren't.

You guys somehow chose to stick with me.

I don't know why you would, but you have. I wonder when you're going to get tired of me and throw me aside. People like you always say you won't, because it's just in your nature not to give up on anyone. As if that would reflect badly on you. But I've been on the breaking point of so many other people.

I wonder when you'll just be tired of me.

"I don't wanna talk about it right now," George says thickly.

Clay gives George a look.

It's that same strange look, like being observed under a microscope. Like Clay somehow knows George is lying, that there's something he isn't saying. George *wants* to talk, he *does*. It's just...

"Whatever you say, alright? We're not here to pressure you or make you feel bad," Clay says.

George nods.

The lunch slows to a slight lull.

George manages to eat enough to where his stomach groans in relatively sated comfort, and he rests his head against the wooden backboard, looking up into one of the lights. It hurts his eyes to look at, and he almost wants to flutter his eyes shut, but he doesn't. He stares into it, letting it burn into his eyes.

Somehow it feels comforting.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," George says to no one in particular.

Nick makes a noise of assent.

“Do you need help finding it? Maybe you could ask one of the—”

“No, I’m not asking the staff,” George blurts out quickly. No offense to the staff or anything, but George generally didn’t enjoy having to talk to people he wasn’t at least a little familiar with. Maybe Nick and Clay were the exception, but he felt familiar with them already. Maybe it’s because they’d taken the first shot in communicating with him and hadn’t gotten disheartened when he hadn’t reciprocated easily.

“Alright,” Clay says. “I mean, I think the signs point to it pretty easily, but if you need help, feel free to yell.”

George finds the bathroom easily.

He slams the door behind him and locks it-- thank god it’s one of those individual ones instead of a shared thing-- and almost feels like he wants to melt into the floor. But he doesn’t, not just because the ground is sticky and gross and *god* knows what’s been left behind on it-- but also because he knows that if he collapses now, he’s not going to get back up.

He stumbles for the faucet, turning it onto the coldest setting and splashing his face with it.

What the hell is wrong with me? Is all he can think.

They just pity me, right? Why else would they just...

But you don’t believe that, George, do you? You think that in the two days they’ve spent getting to know you, they actually want to keep you around?

Don’t you think that’s a bit ridiculous?

...

George watches his expression in the mirror. His scared, somewhat tired reflection looks back at him. His cheekbones are sharper now-- no doubt thanks to the fact he's lost weight due to being unable to find food. His undereye bags look more like luggage at this point, and he sighs. He watches his shoulders slump.

You're not trying to count your blessings before they've even hatched again, are you?

I'm-- I'm not.

You are so bad at lying.

Haven't we been over this, George?

You're me. I don't want to sit here and act like--

So what? You're just monologuing to yourself right now, and you're being dumb. Don't forget what drove you here in the first place, George. You're just going to keep hurting yourself otherwise.

If you show yourself to them, broken puzzle pieces and all-- who's to say they won't turn you away?

Just like they did .

George snaps out of it at the last second.

He hopes it hasn't been very long since he's been in the bathroom, but as he steps out, he's sure that it wouldn't even have mattered. Nick and a staff member-- who appears to be the manager??? - are currently in a heated debate. Clay's got somewhat of a bemused look, which makes it clear this isn't something *Clay* finds to be a big deal.

Just as he steps into view, Nick says,

“See, I *told* you. I promise we won’t make trouble anymore.”

The manager takes a breath, pinching the bridge of their nose.

“*Fine*,” the manager says. “Just... don’t fucking set the restaurant on fire like you did last time.”

“I didn’t even-”

“Nick,” Clay says.

Nick drops the fight.

The manager snatches up their towel, tying it to their belt before storming off.

“George,” Clay says cheerfully. “Welcome back. We’re about to pay the tab.”

“What the hell happened?” George asks, sliding back into his seat.

“The manager recognized us once you left; something about the fact there’s two of us and we happen to match the description of the people they banned. Nick was arguing that there were three of us and technically they couldn’t keep us banned for something that didn’t happen-- because they banned us under a claim that we set property on fire, but we *hadn’t* -- and you coming back somehow managed to prove it? Or maybe they were getting tired of arguing.”

Clay shrugs a little, picking up an orange slice from a plate.

“Anyways, that’s what happened. Want an orange?” Clay holds out the orange slice like an olive branch.

“Sure,” George mumbles, taking it absentmindedly and sucking on it.

“Check, please,” Nick calls out. A server comes over with the tab and Nick fishes out a few dollar bills, dropping them onto the plate. “Keep the change.” The server nods once, returning back to the cash register.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom before we go, actually,” Clay pipes up. “Nick, wanna come?”

“That’s gross, but whatever,” Nick says.

“Wh-aat? No, it’s *not* gross? We’re not even gonna be in it at the same time,” Clay says as he stands up. “George, do you just wanna wait in the truck? I can give you the keys. You know how to open a car, right?”

“I might be from Britain, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t have *cars* to open, jeez,” George grumbles. “But yes, I can take the keys.” Clay laughs a little, dropping the keys into George’s palm. As they head in the direction of the bathroom, George finds his way to the entrance, pushing open the wooden door. A bell jingles as he leaves, and he hears the staff say ‘thank you for your patronage’.

The winter air is brisk, pricking at George’s exposed fingers and cheeks. He finds the truck easily enough (it’s cartoonishly big amongst the pedestrian cars), sticking the keys into the keyhole and twisting. He pulls the keys back out (with some difficulty, he wasn’t going to lie) and slips into the truck, approaching the bed. Something about it is comforting as he sinks his weight down, squeezing his arms around his knees.

Clay and Nick come back soon enough, with Clay taking the driver’s seat.

“Pass me the keys, George?” Clay asks, holding out his hand. George hands them back over, and Clay starts the ignition. “You ready to get this show on the road?”

“Yeah!” Nick says cheerfully.

“I know *you* are, Simpnap,” Clay teases. George hears Nick swear loudly, and a giggle escapes George’s lips despite himself. “How about you, George?” George looks up to see Clay staring at him intently.

“Ready,” George responds, and he’s surprised to find his voice steady.

“Alright, then,” Clay says cheerfully. “Let’s go.”

II.

Chapter Summary

Traveling with Clay and Nick proves to be more chaotic than George could have ever thought it was.

Something in his heart squeezes again when he puts up his coat next to Nick and Clay's.

Like he belongs, like he's the final puzzle piece needed for Nick and Clay to be complete.

And for a brief instant, he wills himself to believe it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

i.

The road is long. George hasn't gotten a chance to appreciate it-- or rather, to just stare at how vast it is. Miles and miles of blacktop, potholes, and drivers that dart in and out of lanes.

"Fucking hell," Nick swears. "Clay, did you *see* that guy? He just cut right in front of you!"

"I see him, Nick, I see him," Clay says bemusedly.

"Who the hell does he think he is? It's a *smart car* trying to dive in front of a truck! If he crashes against us he's literally going to crumple into a ball and he's got the gall to just--" Nick's grip on his phone tightens, his expression not so much *mad* or *furious* but just *frustrated*.

"Nick," Clay laughs. "Come on, man, it's fine. You're gonna make George think you're crazy."

"I don't," George protests. "I think it's... funny." He bites at his lip, tries to parse what exactly he feels. In the fiery maelstrom of his feelings, all he can sense is... "Like, even when Clay's telling you it's not a big deal, you're still fixated on it. That-that's kind of funny."

Nick huffs, puffing out his cheeks.

"So what? I'm just a joke to you?" Nick whines.

“No, Nick, you’re not,” George says.

He sounds sincere, even to his own ears. Surprisingly warm.

“Oh,” Nick says, in a strange wounded tone. Like he’s so surprised that George is willing to admit it to him. And Nick imperceptibly looks at Clay for a split second, and George suddenly realizes. He doesn’t know what he realizes, really-- it’ll have to be something he pulls Nick aside to ask properly, but for what it is, he thinks that Nick is hiding something.

Deeply personal, of course, like all secrets are.

They drive on like that, with Nick commenting on things happening on the road--

(*“Oh my god, is that a dead deer?” Nick says, suddenly pressing his face against the window more severely. “It is! Now I regret looking, oh god--”*

“You always do this,” Clay says, roughly running his knuckles over Nick’s head. “You’re squeamish when you see dead bodies and you keep tempting fate. Just leave the deer alone, it’s literally dead.”

“But I wanna loooooook, ” Nick whines.

“Then don’t comment on how gross it is!”

George’s giggles sound like a melodious bell, chimes rising into the air.)

And George, perfectly content to listen to whatever Clay and Nick want to blabber on about. Their conversations are long, meaningless--

(*“I want a cat,” Clay says.*

“No, we’re not getting a cat,” Nick immediately shoots down the idea, and Clay sighs. “The cat would climb all over the dashboard and fuck up the cab. Techno already has to deal with Schlatt

and Alex's cab, what do you think he's going to say when he sees a litterbox and a big fucking mess in the truck?"

"Yeah, but what about Darryl and Zak? They have Rat, it's not even a big deal. It's just a cat," Clay grumbles. "And it would make me feel so much better about driving. Don't you care about that?"

"I do."

Nick pauses for a second, and George sees the tips of his ears go red.

"But like, we're still not getting a cat."

Clay swerves .

The truck rattles, and George nearly slams into the headboard of the bed.

"What the fuck , " Nick sputters out.

"Sorry," Clay says casually. "There was a car in front, see?"

And Nick does check. George sees it too-- a car veers sharply in front of the truck, merging just ahead of them.

"You're a monster," Nick says without any real venom in his voice. "I thought you were gonna crash us over a cat."

"I mean, I might." Clay grins.

"... You fucking weirdo, I'm serious," Nick splutters.)

"Hey Siri," Clay says. Siri pings a little, and George crowds a little closer because he'd very much like to see what Clay's doing. "Play 'Hello, My Old Heart' ."

“Playing ‘Hello, My Old Heart’ by The Oh Hellos,” Siri says obediently, before a soft guitar begins to strum up.

“Oh, not this song,” Nick moans out. “You’re literally going to make me cry.”

“I feel like George needs to hear it. You know, like an initiation ceremony,” Clay says. And he begins to sing.

George swears that his heartbeat amps up, the little butterflies in his stomach suddenly revving into overdrive as he realizes that Clay can, in fact, *sing*. He’s not falling for this man only two days after they’ve been properly acquainted with each other, he *isn’t*. He’s only enraptured by the way Clay sings, a soft, husky whisper that sends tingles down George’s spine and causes a lump to form in his throat.

“*Don’t leave me here alone,*” Clay croons softly, and George swears to the high heavens Clay did this on purpose.

“*I wanna find a home, and I wanna share it with you .*”

George wonders if he could.

If his home is with Nick and Clay, he thinks that he might be able to live on.

George feels a twinge of something bubbling in his chest, like a dark tendril wrapping around his heart.

But I... don’t deserve this. Do I?

ii.

“How far is the closest truck stop?” Clay asks.

“About... another two miles,” Nick says. “Why?”

“We’re running out of gas. We should’ve refueled earlier, but there’s no helping it now,” Clay says. He feels a slight twinge of frustration-- he’d been so caught up in trying to help George that he’d forgotten about the truck. It’s not George’s fault, obviously-- it’s *not*. It’s his fault, sure, but nothing that he has to dwell on. Clay lets out a breath. He pictures balling up the frustration and negative emotions building inside of him... and then releases. It empties out of him in one fell swoop, and his reassuring smile returns to his face. “Let’s just stop and rest there. We... pretty much all need to shower, I think.”

(He’s not going to mention the fact that the cabin smells... decently ripe at this point.)

“Thank God,” Clay hears George say from the back. “I feel gross all over.”

Clay grins.

“Well, it’ll be your lucky day. Have you ever washed at a truck stop before?” Clay asks, quickly sparing a glance over his shoulder where George is still sitting on the bed.

“Um,” George halts a little. “Not really, no. What’s it like?”

“It’s a shower, for starters,” Nick says with a bit of sass to his voice. Clay reaches across the dash to poke him in the side, right under his ribs. Nick shrieks like he’s just been shanked-- which he... sort of was, Clay supposed.

“Nick’s right on some level in saying that it’s basically just a shower. We don’t usually rent hotel rooms, so if you want a proper bath in a tub or whatever, that’s a bit harder,” Clay explains. “But basically we can rent a truck stop shower stall using a token and we can use it for as long as we want.”

“Oh,” George says. “Do they allow more than one person in the stall?”

“They’re pretty big, so... the last one Nick and I went to allowed both of us to go in,” Clay says. “We could probably slip you in.”

“Oh, ew,” George recoils. “Don’t say it like that.”

“Don’t blame me for your misinterpretation of what I said,” Clay teases. “But yeah, I think if we bartered for it you could probably fit. You’re about as big as Nick, right? Way tinier than me, anyways.”

“Fuck you, man,” Nick says. “I’m not even that short.”

“You wear three-inch platform sneakers, I think that says everything,” Clay says as he hears George snort.

“Clay, I thought you agreed to not make fun of me. I don’t even wear those sneakers that often,” Nick says desperately, reaching to cling onto Clay’s shirtsleeve.

“I never promised to not make fun of you. I don’t break promises, but breaking agreements is funny,” Clay says. “How much farther to the truck stop?”

“Point four miles,” Nick says smoothly. Perfectly in sync, as Nick has always been ever since he’s entered Clay’s life. “Anyways, it’s still not fair. I bought those sneakers with confidence, and now you’re just crushing my dreams. They’re still in the cubby.”

“Wear them, man. I don’t care,” Clay says. “The only thing I don’t want is for you to stick your feet on the dash and like, get foot marks all over the windshield. That’s annoying.” Nick hums agreeably at that, and Clay returns to focusing on the road, watching for the sign that tells him to either shift left or right to enter the truck stop.

Clay doesn’t introspect as often as he thinks Nick or George does.

He’d confessed that to Nick, once-- that he was the kind of person who fell asleep immediately once his head hit the pillow because there was nothing for him to really ponder. Not in a bad way, not in a good way-- but rather, because he’d reconciled the best and the worst of himself.

(“Lucky,” Nick murmured to him, propping himself on an elbow. “I wish that could be me.”

“It can,” Clay said, looking up at the ceiling, watching the flickering lights of other trucks and cars driving by. In the distance, he hears a plane take off into the air, its roar becoming more deafening.

“It can’t,” Nick corrected him. Clay craned his head to look into Nick’s eyes, dark and full of an unspoken sadness.

“Why not?” Clay asked.

Nick paused, his teeth worrying at his lips. In the dark, Clay can only see the glint of saliva as Nick wetted his lips.

“I’m not you, Clay,” Nick murmured. “I’ve got shit I’m not brave enough to deal with.” Nick reached out his hand across the bed, an unspoken gesture for Clay to take it.

Clay clasped Nick’s hand. Rubbed small circles into the space between his thumb and index finger, and Nick’s breath hitched slightly.

“It’s okay,” Clay murmured. “We have all the time in the world, you know. If you need me, I’m here.” Always, Clay wanted to say. But he wondered if that would scare Nick off, push him away.

Nick pushed back.

“I know,” Nick murmured. Clay’s eyes fluttered shut, and just before he nods off, he hears Nick say, “and that’s what scares me so much.”)

Sometimes he wishes he were a literal sponge, so he could scrub and soak away the bad thoughts that plagued Nick (and George’s, he was very sure something was definitely floating around in George’s brain). But Clay can’t. He can’t be the cure-all, the panacea for Nick’s problems. And Clay knows that Nick for sure doesn’t *want* him to be the cure for his problems.

It’s not healthy for anyone to keep living in the past forever.

Clay pulls into the truck stop and starts driving for the gas station.

(“Did you know in New Jersey,” Clay hears Nick say to George, “you can’t fill your own gas tank? It’s unlawful to serve yourself.”)

“Oh, really? Weird,” George says back.)

As he pulls into the gas station, he kills the ignition and jumps out of the truck to select the fuel. He fumbles for his wallet as he presses on the diesel fuel and selects the ‘fill tank’ option.

“Nick, do you wanna like, take George to the main store to see if you guys can’t find something we can eat for dinner? Not Subway, please,” Clay calls. He hears Nick shout in assent, and Clay busies himself with inserting the gas pump into the gas tank’s open reservoir. And then he hears a familiar, *booming* voice.

“IS THAT *THE BIG MAN HIMSELF, CLAY?* ”

Clay looks up to see-- and then he immediately shoves his head back down, a snort leaving his lips.

“*DON’T LOOK AWAY FROM ME, CLAY. I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME.*” The voice is autotuned now. Like a vocoded video, or something worse.

“YEAH, I CAN HEAR YOU, SCHLATT. FUCK OFF,” Clay shouts back. “AREN’T YOU GOING TO BLAST POOR ALEX’S EARDRUMS OFF?”

“**I’M GOOD, BIG MAN CLAY. DON’T WORRY ABOUT ME,**” says another voice. Alex, for sure. In a purposefully booming voice, like the reverb has been turned all the way on. Clay finally sees the truck. It’s... a truck, if anything. There’s a beaten-up baby toy tied to the front grate of it-- Clay’s memory of it is foggy, but he remembers a time where the baby looked... at least halfway pristine. Alex pulls into the refueling pump right across from Clay, jumping out of the truck to follow the same motions Clay went through.

“How are you, though, for real?” Clay asks, cocking his head.

“Ah, you know the deal. It’s just me, the road, the truck, and Schlatt,” Alex says with a cocksure grin, reaching over to give Clay a fist bump. “But it’s funny to run into you here. Are we doing the same route?”

“Probably not,” Clay answers. “I’m going north. You?”

“Oh, geez. I’m heading down south,” Alex responds. “But whatever, it’s good to see you here. How about we like, get dinner or something?”

“Usually I’d ask for the dinner date first, but I guess you’re already some steps ahead of me,” Clay

wheezes. “I’m sure Nick will be happy to see you.”

“Oh, maybe.” Alex shrugs.

There’s a sudden cracking sound, and Alex whips his head around.

“SCHLATT,” Alex shouts.

“I didn’t do anything,” Schlatt says from within the truck. Clay already knows it’s a lie from the litany of scraping sounds that follow Schlatt’s hurried exclamation.

“Come out and say hi to Clay. And don’t take the megaphone with you,” Alex says like he’s attempting to discipline an unruly child. Schlatt piles out of the truck in close to no time at all, and Clay grins a little.

“You *still* have the mutton chops?” Clay asks, reaching out to grasp Schlatt’s outstretched hand.

“What about it?” Schlatt asks. “It’s not a big deal.” Clay remembers the last time he’d talked to Schlatt on the road-- he hadn’t had the mutton chops yet, but there had been quite a bit of stubble. Clay sees Alex mouthing ‘it’s so fucking ugly’ from behind Schlatt, and Clay snorts a little. Schlatt’s gaze darkens comically. “What’s so funny, Clay?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Clay wheezes out.

At this point, Nick and George thankfully come back around.

“There’s a restaurant in there that’s not a Subway,” Nick says. “It’s... noodles, I think? Or it might be takeout. Oh, wait!” Nick dashes up to give Alex a tight hug. “Hey, dude! Nice to see you.”

“Hey,” Alex says easily, patting Nick on the back roughly before extricating himself from the hug. “Good to see you too. Wait.” Alex’s pointed gaze narrows onto George, who sputters a bit. “Wait, Clay, Nick... did you guys get a new driving partner? Who’s this twink?”

“Uh, I, um,” George stammers out. “Wait, what, I--”

“This is George,” Clay says, stepping in front of George almost instinctively.

Schlatt wolf-whistles.

“I can’t believe you’ve kidnapped an emotionally vulnerable twink, Clay. I mean, I knew you weren’t above it, but still--” Schlatt begins to say before Alex knees him in the gut. “Alex, what the *fuck* --”

“Schlatt,” Alex hisses. “You don’t just say that to the *emotionally vulnerable twink’s* face.”

“So you think he’s--”

“Don’t even finish your fucking sentence, Schlatt. Besides, what point does that--”

Clay feels George’s fingers tighten on the back of his coat.

“Are you okay?” Clay murmurs to him.

George doesn’t answer.

“Guys, lay off,” Clay says. As Alex and Schlatt’s argument heightens in intensity, Clay feels a prickling of annoyance. “Guys, lay *off*. Last warning.”

Alex and Schlatt begrudgingly shut up.

“Let’s go get dinner,” Clay says. “Alex, how about you make it your treat?”

“You slick motherfucker,” Alex sighs. “Fine. *Fine*. ”

iii.

Not all truckers are born equal. George knows this now. Some truckers are nice, like Clay and

Nick. Others come off like they're wholly unhinged. Like Schlatt and Alex. They... they're probably nice people, but George is far too scared of them to make sure that they are. He's not sure whether them yelling at each other all the time is indicative of the fact that they're friends, nice, or what.

The restaurant that he and Nick managed to scope out is a noodle restaurant for sure, owned by a kindly Chinese couple that gave them way more food than normal once they realized the group was a band of truckers.

"So, like, how'd it happen?" The trucker known to George now as Alex is... terrifying to say the least. Not just because of the fact he seems so quickly moved into violence every time his trucking partner, Schlatt, even *opens* his mouth, but also because of the infectious, nonstop energy the man seems to exert.

"What do you mean?" Nick asks, slurping down a mouthful of noodles.

"You know what I mean," Alex says irritably. "How'd you get George. How'd *anyone* agree to be in a cramped truck with you guys."

"Oh, we're not that bad. Not as bad as you two," Clay says with a grin.

Alex opens his mouth to protest loudly.

And then he closes it before any sound can come out.

"You know what, fine," Alex says before going back to slurping at his noodles. "I agree. If it had been me and Schlatt trying to pick up George, George would've ran the other way. Right?"

"A-ah, what?" George startles from his haze.

Alex tsks.

"Okay, George. Level with me." Alex claps his hands together, pointing them in George's direction. "If, hypothetically speaking, you saw me, a hot piece of fat ass, along with Schlatt, with

his really gross mutton chops and general alcoholic aura, would you have taken anything we gave you.”

“No,” George says immediately.

“See? Fuckin’ called it,” Alex says.

“What? What was called?” George is so confused. What the hell is this? Some inside joke??

“You clearly only followed truckers because it was Clay and Nick,” Alex says goodnaturedly. “Whether it be aesthetic attraction or nay, sexual attraction, or maybe the fact that you’ve been deprived of any positive interactions with men in general and have chosen to latch onto the—”

“Alex, that’s enough,” Clay says sharply. “You’re making George uncomfortable.”

George is secretly glad that Clay has chosen to speak up-- he’d been feeling a bit uncomfortable, nervousness and embarrassment prickling behind his eyes unpleasantly.

“Sorry.” Alex sounds sincere, genuinely sincere. “I didn’t mean to.”

George looks up at Alex, somewhat surprised.

He’s... never really had people be sincere to him like this before.

Genuinely apologetic.

“Oh,” George says stupidly.

“Look, you don’t have to accept my apology,” Alex says, “but just know I really didn’t mean to take it so far.”

“No, I-I accept it, just...” *Just nobody’s apologized to me like that before. Like my feelings mattered to them.* “Nothing. It’s alright. You were just coming off... a bit aggressive, I guess.”

“Oh, sorry. I have problems understanding when I’ve crossed boundaries; no excuse, obviously,” Alex says apologetically.

“...” George lifts up his chopsticks and eats another mouthful of noodles. “Okay. Thanks... I guess.”

The awkward atmosphere feels like a thick blanket, coating the entire table. George feels his throat start to close up, his palms start to sweat. He almost drops his chopsticks as Schlatt says,

“Alright, so now that the atmosphere has been suitably fucked—” (Alex exclaims loudly.) “How about some small talk?”

“Sure,” Nick says immediately. “Sounds good.”

George’s head fogs up. Nick and Schlatt are talking animatedly about something-or-other, and Alex is chiming in (something about goats? Pandas? What the hell is their conversation all about?). The fog in George’s brain settles into his nerves, and his hands feel like they’ve started to detach from his arms. It almost feels like he’s floating in the middle of space— his limbs feel achy and heavy but also light and floaty, like a balloon animal. He wouldn’t even know he’s eating if it wasn’t for the fact that the shocks of hot soup run through his system, a feeble attempt at keeping his brain at the forefront.

“... George?”

There was something else that had left Nick’s mouth before his name.

For sure.

But George hasn’t been paying attention at all.

“Wh-what?” George stutters out, and he winces a little when he hears his voice. It sounds hoarse.

Too hoarse.

“I asked you what your favorite animal is, George,” Nick says. He doesn’t sound mad. But something in his eyes— something in Nick’s eyes makes George shrink in his seat.

“Oh, um. Cats,” George says. “I like cats.”

“Oh, Nick. Friendship ended with you— George is now my best friend,” Clay says immediately.

“What? What the hell?” Nick splutters. “Just because he likes cats??”

“Yes!” Clay says. “I bet George would let me get a cat in the truck. Right?”

George struggles to focus. Tries not to let his mind splinter across the thin fibers of his brain.

“Yeah, I would,” George says with a grin. It feels like forcing syrupy molasses to occupy one spot — it’s so, so hard. But somehow he manages to make something convincing, and he thinks Clay doesn’t spend too much time looking at him, parsing him.

“See? George understands,” Clay says. Clay reaches out a hand to wrap it around George’s shoulders, but hesitates a little. George’s heart flutters, realizes that Clay is holding back because he isn’t sure if George wants to be touched or not. George gives a small nod, and Clay securely wraps his arm around George’s shoulders, a long span of warmth across his shoulders.

...

It’s nice.

“Ugh, whatever, you dumb simp,” Nick says.

“I’m not a *simp*,” Clay protests.

“Yes, you are. You’ve literally started simping for George just because he said he’d let you get a cat.” Nick’s eyes glimmer with barely hidden mirth.

Clay splutters, lifts his hand from George’s shoulder to pick up his chopstick, pointing it at Nick’s face.

“You keep being a bully to me,” Clay says in mock offense. “I’ll tell Techno you’re being a bully and he’ll definitely reassign you.”

“No, he won’t,” Nick says, though his voice takes on a more panicked cadence. “He loves me too much to replace me with some other idiot. And besides, who else will be able to handle you?”

George feels envious.

Something about the fact that Nick works so closely with Clay turns something dark in his chest, makes him wish that he could have that. Something *like* that.

You don’t deserve it, George.

Not even a bit.

But when Schlatt and Alex start laughing-- cacophony barely contained-- followed by Clay dropping the chopstick and wheezing over the table, laughing to near tears and Nick bending over backwards, George can’t help but laugh as well.

The voice in his head falls quiet, contained if only for a moment.

iv.

The conversation slows to a grinding halt as the meal slowly finishes.

George is feeling a bit fuzzy around the edges again-- he’s not quite sure why, but he really can’t force himself to pay attention to the conversation. There’s some kind of argument over the tab

(there's a lot of swearing and yelling, followed by Alex slamming down a wad of cash and Clay following suit) and Schlatt and Alex are leaving the table, waving goodbye.

"Wait," Alex says. "Hold on, I wanna give George something."

"What?" George asks, suddenly startled and wary. "What do you want to give me?" *And is this a trick?*

"George," Alex says. "You look like I've just suggested I'm going to stab you with a wooden stake or something. Relax, man."

George feels a rush of embarrassment running over him, but he suddenly realizes Clay's holding onto his hand, rubbing soft circles into his palm. And suddenly, it's easier to focus. George exhales shakily, giving Alex a nervous smile. It *feels* like it's been forced out of him.

"Come to the truck," Alex says. "Sorry, Clay, I'll have to take this twink for a spin. Is that alright?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Just make sure to return him, asshole," Clay responds.

Alex gives a wolfish grin.

"In one piece?" Alex asks, raising his eyebrows.

"You *know* what I mean-- don't fuck him up too badly," Clay chides before he turns back. "George, do you want me to wait for you?"

George grapples with that for a second-- he doesn't want to bother Clay, but Clay's already offering... but what if this was just another chip that Clay could use to get George to--

But they're not like that, George.

Clay isn't like that.

"Yeah," George stutters out, trying not to let his voice shake. It sounds weak to his own ears, and he winces a little.

“Alright. Nick, wait here too,” Clay calls out to Nick, who turns to give a thumbs-up. Clay gives George a reassuring smile, almost as if to reassure George it’s not a bother to wait for him. George tries to believe that desperately— as much as his mind is screaming at him that Clay and Nick will drop him at a second if he dares show any sign that he wants to *rely* on them, that if he shows how vulnerable and soft-shelled he is, they’ll crush him and throw him back into the sea.

“Come on, George, get your ass over here,” Alex says in a tone that’s more humorous than malicious. George follows Alex— half out of fear, half out of a morbid curiosity.

The inside of Alex and Schlatt’s truck is like a horrible, stormy night to Clay and Nick’s bright sunny day. There’s a half-open mini fridge containing what appears to be an *obscene* amount of beer and other soft drinks, clothes strewn about everywhere, not to mention the assorted trinkets scattered around the room that seemed to be in various states of disrepair. A small box that George was *curious* about, until he touches what appears to be a small plate on the top of the box and the box opens, and a truly misshapen cat reaches to swipe at the plate, not quite making it across the box.

“How do you live like this?” Is all George can say.

“Georgie,” Alex says, turning to place his hands on George’s shoulders, getting really close. Alex’s breath is hot on George’s ear. George feels visceral fear. “ *I don’t.* ”

George splutters.

Alex releases George’s shoulders, shuffling through a pile of clothes before pulling out a dark yellow scarf.

“Here,” Alex says, holding it out to George. “For you.”

“...” George feels a sense of dread. “Why would you give me this?”

“Because I’m nice,” Alex says. “And also, neither me or Schlatt look *that* good in scarves. This one’s completely clean, I swear.”

George takes it and wraps it around his neck.

“Do I need to, like, pay you back, or something...?” George asks. The scarf is warm, and it *feels* like high quality— but he can’t tell whether he was given a green or a red scarf. It prickles at the back of his mind.

“What? No. You’re a trucker now,” Alex says. “We stick together when we meet up, and then we leave each other the hell alone when we’re by ourselves. And besides, your neck looks really long and definitely needs something to cover it up. You know, assorted marks and whatever.”

George’s face goes bright red.

“Alex, you’re horrible,” George says without much fight in his voice.

“Yeah, I get that a lot from my therapist,” Alex says jokingly. Alex leans down to scrounge through the mini-fridge, pulling out a bottle of completely battered lemonade, holding it out to George like a peace offering.

George squints.

“It’s not poisoned or anything,” Alex says. “A gift if you want it.”

George takes it.

It’s freezing. And yet somehow it shocks George back to his senses, like a cold front from the north.

“Thanks,” George says. “For the lemonade. And the scarf.”

“You’re welcome, George. Can you tell Schlatt to head back? I think he’s probably browsing the liquor cabinet or some shit, and we already have too many beers and he knows it,” Alex says as he heads for the front of the truck.

George nods shakily before he steps out of the truck, and he feels a wave of relief wash over him as he sees Clay standing there along with Nick. They weren't going to leave him behind— why had he *ever* —

“George,” Nick says with a smile. “Nice scarf.”

“Uh...” George tugs at the plush fabric, a shaky breath leaving his lips. “Thank you, Nick.”

“Me and Clay were thinking that blue was good, but actually— red does look nice on you too,” Nick says so casually that it makes George's heart pound and his rib cage flutter.

“Oh, so it's red,” George murmurs.

“Nick, you literally can't even deny you're being a simp on main now, right?” Clay teases, running a hand through Nick's hair roughly, a more teasing gesture than anything else. Nick's face flushes, and he pushes Clay away from him.

“I'm not,” Nick blurts out. “I'm just saying. Plus, it's all over your face too that you think he looks good.”

Clay chokes on a breath.

“No, what? My face is *perfectly* monotone right now. You're the one who can't ever hide anything from me,” Clay responds. As the argument continues, with Nick loudly protesting that he *wasn't* simping, it was a simple compliment, and since when did compliments equal simping— George giggles a little, feeling somewhat bashful.

“You guys,” George gets out. His cheeks are bright red and flushed, his lips parted to let cold air rush his lungs over and over and over again. “You're making me embarrassed. Let's just go shower.”

“Oh,” Clay says. “Yes, of course.”

(And for the record, the three find Schlatt combing through a non-alcoholic drink section. George

thinks it's kind of sweet.)

"How many of you are showering?"

"Three," Clay answers.

"Uh... how many stalls... do you want?" the employee looks up from their phone, suddenly perplexed.

"Uh, is one okay?" Clay asks.

The employee looks over them.

George stifles a laugh.

It shouldn't be funny, and yet somehow he thinks it is. Three of them standing in front of the shower building, with both Nick and Clay holding giant duffel bags-- ("They don't have toiletries in the shower, but they do have towels. We generally bring our own, though? Keeps the price down," Nick explained.) and George squished between them, nervous.

"... It's usually against protocol, but it's been a quiet night," the employee sighs. "Just don't cause trouble, there's literally no cameras in there. Do you have like, a membership or anything?"

"Yeah," Clay says, shuffling through his wallet to pull out the truck stop card. "We're diamond members, so we get a free shower every day."

"Alright," the employee says, swiping the card through the card reader. "On the house, then. Don't use up all the hot water."

"Thanks," Clay says gratefully.

"Room one, on your left." The employee returns to their phone, now seemingly unbothered.

The shower is... both bigger and cleaner than George expects. There's... a toilet, a sink, and some cabinets to place bags onto. Clay and Nick drop off the bags onto one of the counters, and then they look expectantly at George. Almost like they're waiting for him to say something. George cants his shoulders upward.

"What are you guys looking at me for?" George asks, his voice taking a bit of a whiny tone.

"Uh," Nick says nervously, "just wonderin' if you wanted to shower first."

"Oh. Um, yeah, sure. It's just like a regular shower, right?" George asks.

"Yeah, basically. Um... we got a change of clothes for you if you want. You know, to wear it. We kinda just sorted through our own clothes, found something we thought you could fit." Nick's nose scrunches a little as he laughs, and George shoots him a dirty look.

"I'm short, alright, but not that short. *Jesus*," George grumbles. Nick's still giggling, hard enough now that his shoulders are starting to shake and his eyes are starting to water. George admires it for a second-- something about how Nick throws himself into his laughs. It's almost...

Are you kidding me, George?

Seriously?

George's face drops a little.

He's not sure whether Nick or Clay pick up on it. Part of him is glad, since that means that he doesn't have to make them worry, doesn't have to feel his heart twisting out of repair when they ask him if he's alright. Nick throws George a bundle of clothes. There's a grey hoodie and dark grey sweatpants, as well as a pair of socks. At least they were thinking about all aspects of the outfit.

"Oh, also." Clay throws George a towel and a bar of soap, along with two travel-sized bottles of shampoo and conditioner respectively.

"I thought you guys only used like, what's it called..." George snaps his fingers. "Head and

Shoulders. That shampoo-conditioner hybrid.”

“God no,” Nick says, wrinkling his nose. “That shit dries my hair out. Couldn’t ever fucking imagine using it. Clay probably does.”

“No, I literally use the same exact shampoo and conditioner brands as you--”

George dips out of the argument to enter the shower. He doesn’t remember the last time he’s *used* a shower-- and thank god it’s winter, where he doesn’t really sweat that much, but for sure he feels a layer of grime and built-up filth on his skin, and it bothers him more than he’d like to admit.

“Do you want us to wait outside, George?” Clay asks.

George mulls that over before he nods.

“Yeah,” George says. “Don’t want you peeping.”

“You’re making it sound like we’re perverts or something, George,” Nick says with a bit of a teasing lilt to his voice. “We wouldn’t look if you didn’t want us to.”

“Gross regardless,” George grumbles. “Just get out.” He unzips his jacket, throwing it at Nick’s face. He grins a little despite himself as Nick screams in shock, but he hears two sets of footsteps piling out the door and it slams. And now, for sure, he’s alone.

Somehow it’s lonely.

But the thrill of finally having a clean shower is more enticing, and he turns it on first. The water comes out cold, but George almost cries with relief when it turns warm and then *hot*.

He strips down, more focused on just feeling the sensation of hot water against his skin and the feeling of the weeks (months? Who knows at this point...) of grime washing off. The shampoo is liquidy, slipping through his fingers before he gets the chance to put it on his hair, but it doesn’t really matter to him as he piles it on.

I’m incredibly lucky, George thinks as he rubs at his hair.

To have found people who would take care of me.

But how do you know they'll take care of you forever?

You're just running away again.

You're just waiting for that point where Clay and Nick don't want you anymore.

You ran away from them , now you're already planning on running from Clay and Nick as soon as they start showing signs they don't want you around.

Isn't that all you can do?

Are you worth it, George?

Are you worth being loved, being cared for, being treasured?

I...

I don't think you are. You know I'm right, don't you?

How can anyone love this? Love you ?

I'm sure once the novelty wears off, Clay and Nick will realize nothing about you is worth keeping around. You're not a good person, you lack motivation or drive— things they have in spades.

They're good people.

And what are you?

George's hands fall slack. Conditioner runs from his hair, just narrowly avoiding his eyes and falling into the drain. His inner monologue always seems to creep in whenever he's at a point where he thinks he can relax. He feels so *empty* , like a wax or tinfoil idol, crumpling and breaking down on fault lines, disappearing under heat.

George hears a sharp knock against the door.

“George, are you alright in there? You’ve been in there for twenty minutes—”

That’s Nick’s voice.

“Nick, don’t rush him, I’m sure he’s alright.”

Clay sounds slightly concerned, though his voice is more level, calmer.

“Alright, well— you don’t have to answer, but if there’s anything you need, just tell us.”

George feels a lump forming in his throat. He almost wants to cry— but his voice comes out surprisingly steady.

“I’m alright, don’t worry about me,” George gets out. “Just trying to get the dirt off.”

“Oh, okay. As long as you’re alright.” Nick sounds heavily relieved.

Somehow, it sends George’s heart spinning that Nick did seem concerned.

The voice in his head is thankfully, *thankfully* silent.

George feels a pleasant haze drift over him. He’s warm, an uncomfortably-comfortable warmth that fills his blood, clouds his mind. Nick’s clothes feel comfy. (They’re probably Nick’s clothes, given that he can actually wear them. No offense to Clay, but he’s a bit too bulky for his clothes to reasonably fit George that well.) His hair is drier now, and now that it’s clean, George appreciates the fact that his hair still has a noticeable shine.

He feels drowsy.

“Don’t fall asleep on us now, George,” Clay whispers softly.

“I’m not falling asleep,” George grumbles. “If you guys would hurry up, then you might catch me still awake.” His head leans against the concrete wall outside the shower stall, a hard reminder to stay grounded.

“Alright, you baby,” Clay says, and George’s dazed mind can’t help but think he sounds so painfully fond. It hurts his chest to think about it-- that Clay’s fondness could be directed towards him, a painful wave that threatens to take him far out where he can’t swim back to the safety of his shore. A riptide, perhaps. George feels his body shifting, and then he realizes that Clay’s hands are wrapped around his thighs, carrying him on his back.

George’s face flushes.

“This alright?” Clay asks.

Clay’s hair is still damp. George’s hands reach to entangle themselves in the firm fabric of Clay’s jacket.

“Yeah,” George murmurs.

Maybe it’s the fact he feels so sleepy or the fact that he feels so warm that he’s letting himself be puppetted like this, like wet clay easily molded into any shape.

“George, why do you sleep so much, anyways?” Nick asks. He’s coming off from somewhere near the right. George turns his head to face Nick, and through a sleep-thick voice, says,

“I think my sleep schedule is well and truly fucked.”

“Not surprised,” Nick hums. “Well, whatever.”

The winter air, crisp and sharp, doesn't do that much to George's sleepy state, and he buries his face deeper into the faux fur lining of Clay's coat, breathing deeply.

Sleep takes him, like that-- a warm sensation, soft like sinking into a marshmallow or a memory foam pillow.

Safe.

V.

Warm.

It's that same comfortably uncomfortable warmth, all around him.

George lets out a soft moan of tired unwillingness, his eyes fluttering open to find an arm has been casually slung around his chest, his legs entangled by two other pairs of legs. Another arm is wrapped tightly around his right arm, a soft breathing at his neck. George cranes his head very, *very* gently to find that Nick is still snugly asleep, his breathing soft and slow. Same with Clay.

George's heart winces. He doesn't know what it's like to be able to wake up in this kind of embrace-- what is he supposed to feel? Happy? Embarrassed? *Safe, at peace, in lo-*

George's face turns completely red.

Don't kid yourself.

Nick stirs a little.

George jolts.

"Mmmh," Nick murmurs. "Good morning..."

George watches as Nick wakes up, and he vaguely, just vaguely looks like a fairytale prince awakening from enchanted sleep. Or was it the princess that— well, it didn't matter.

"Morning," George whispers.

Nick still looks a bit groggy, but when he finally, *finally* realizes his arm has been slung around George's torso, he retracts his hand instantly.

"*Shit*," Nick whispers, his voice more urgent now. "George, sorry—"

"No, it-it's fine," George gets out, his voice stabler than he thinks it should be. "Just..."

Nick buries his face in a pillow, mumbling something that sounds incomprehensible. George doesn't have the heart to ask Nick to speak up, to tell him what he's been blabbering about into soft cotton— and he doesn't have to, because Clay stirs a little as well, squeezing George's arm tightly.

"Nick, stop making so much noise," Clay groans softly. His breath feathers on George's skin, and he can't help but *flush* and shift uncomfortably.

"Clay, that tickles," George complains softly.

"Then move away," Clay says. George can *feel* the smile on his neck, a teasing smirk. As Clay speaks, he squeezes George's arm tighter, pinning him still.

"You're-you're doing this on purpose," George stutters out.

"Tell me something I don't know," Clay says.

"We should be getting up," Nick says, rolling over to face Clay and George.

“No,” Clay whines. “Bed comfy and soft. Outside hard and cold.”

“We need to put some more miles on the road, Clay,” Nick says patiently, though he isn’t getting up either.

Clay gently extricates his arms from around George’s, putting his pillow over his face.

“Five more minutes,” Clay says stubbornly.

“God, you’re such a baby,” Nick says with such warmth in his voice that George is surprised Clay isn’t even the slightest bit embarrassed or flustered by it. Nick swings his legs off the bed, stepping into his sneakers as he heads for the mini fridge. “What do you guys wanna eat for breakfast?”

“Uh, a banana...?” George says.

“Can I get you,” Clay gets out before he wheezes painfully. George sees Nick practically jolt.

“No, shut the fuck up,” Nick’s voice pitches higher with every word. “Holy *shit*, Clay, I don’t even know whether you—”

“It’s a joke, Sappy, it’s alright,” Clay murmurs. “But I’ll take a banana too.”

Nick’s shoulders slump with relief.

“Alright, yeah. Here you guys go.” Nick returns with two mostly bruised bananas as well as an apple. That one’s probably for Nick. George reached out to take one of the bananas, peeling it and taking a bite.

“We definitely need to buy more supplies,” Clay says. “Could’ve sworn we had way more fruit.”

“Yeah, that’s what driving snacks do to the food supply,” Nick says. “We’ve been on the road for so long and every time I’m still shocked by how fast we burn through snacks or food of any sort.”

“Mmm...” Clay checks the analog clock. 6 AM. “Let’s drive for six hours, and then we gotta restock and buy some clothes.” He peels his banana deftly, taking big bites.

“What... shopping? For clothes? Why would we-” George stops himself the moment ‘we’ leaves his lips. It’s strange, thinking of them as a unit. As three people working together, rather than just him, and *then* Clay and Nick. It makes his heart ache, his head throb, his eyes sting. He’s not going to cry and apologize. He can’t.

“For you,” Clay says through a mouthful of banana before swallowing. “As much as I like seeing you in my coat—” (George’s face goes bright red and he nearly chokes on a mouthful of his banana) “— it’s way too big for you and it’s better, from experience, to have clothes that fit you while trucking.”

George nods.

Well, it made sense.

“Well, where are we shopping?” George asks, trying not to sound even a bit excited. But the glint in Nick’s eyes tells George that he’s probably spilled the beans.

“Oh, Clay! Let’s go to a mall,” Nick blurts out. “So we can buy better clothes—”

“Not for you, Nick, remember. Hands off,” Clay says, a smirk on his lips.

“Ugh, I wasn’t gonna— oh, fuck you. Fine,” Nick sighs. “But fine. Let’s just get on the road.”

The drive is about as eventful as it ever can be, with Nick pulling up a four hour playlist and smashing reshuffle.

(“What the hell is this?” Clay asks, grabbing the phone from the dash. “‘Leave, Luanne’? What is this from ?”

“Oh, a musical called 35MM, it’s basically a musical told through photos--”

Nick blabbers on about this for thirty minutes straight.

George doesn’t find it adorable at all.)

They pass through fields of wild grass, and George finds himself entranced by the puffs of seeds floating into the air, reflected against the cold winter sky.

(*“You should see this in the spring,” Clay says. “The entire field lights up, like it’s happy to see you.”*

“Ugh, stop being such a poet,” Nick says dramatically.

Clay laughs at that, falling forward in his seat.)

They manage to pass a state line in those six hours, with Nick driving most of the stretch and Clay switching in after a brief bathroom break. George spends most of the time listening quietly, lying on the bed and looking up at the shifting ceiling.

“Let’s find a mall,” Clay says. “Hey Siri, give me the directions to the nearest mall.”

“ Finding the nearest mall, ” Siri reports. “ Shift to the right lane on I-28 in one mile. ”

“Okay, so,” Nick turns back in his seat to face George. “What do you wanna get?”

“Um...” George presses his lips together, considers that. “I think... I’d like new pants, maybe? Also a new jacket... shirt... coat...”

“So like, the whole wardrobe,” Clay says with a laugh.

“No-- wait. Uh... ugh, *fine*, you’re right,” George says irritably. “I just left Britain with these clothes on my back, alright? I haven’t had a chance to buy anything for myself in awhile.”

George's face suddenly pales when he realizes-- *Shit*.

Neither Clay or Nick say anything.

The oppressive silence presses down on George's ear drums, clogs his throat with something fierce.

"Look," George whispers, barely hearing his own voice above the rattling of the truck, "just forget what I said, alright? I'm fine now."

"George," Clay says. "It's not that I'm worried about." Clay flicks on the signal to shift lanes. "I just think you're not being honest with yourself. And I'm not in any position to tell you what to do, but I just want you to remember this-- that you don't have to act like everything's fine on our behalf. On me or Nick's behalf."

Clay turns around at that moment-- looking at George. *Seeing* him.

George's throat goes dry.

Maybe that's why they call it eye contact-- Clay's eyes, pressing into his-- seeing everything. Seeing him for who he really is.

"I-I'm not."

Clay frowns a little, but turns back around.

Nick doesn't say anything for the rest of the way to the mall.

George hasn't seen particularly big malls before. He knows that a lot of American malls are *big*, yes, but there's something different about seeing one in person. Nick's face lights up, and he almost looks like a kid at a candy shop-- and George giggles a little. Nick's face flushes bright, and he rolls his eyes.

“Can’t a man be excited?” Nick asks.

“I mean, it’s not that,” George says. “I think you just look...”

He can’t really place a name to Nick’s expression, so George chooses--

“You look younger.”

Nick cocks his head.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Georgie?” Nick leans closer to observe George’s expression, and George can’t help but shift his eyes up, away from Nick. He feels heat blooming on the tops of his cheeks, spreading across his nose.

“It-it just means that,” George stutters out, “It means that I haven’t seen you look... like... really relaxed. I-I dunno, it feels like you’ve got... something that won’t let you--” George shakes his head. “Look, it doesn’t matter. I’m not trying to assume anything, just--”

Nick scratches at his chin, picking at some of the stubble forming.

“No, it’s fine, George,” Nick says softly. “I’m just... that’s different.”

Different than what?

Nick’s eyes are on Clay’s back.

“You guys coming or what?” Clay asks, turning around. “Don’t make me turn this shopping spree around, fellas.”

“No, no, Clay. We’re coming,” Nick calls.

George tries really hard not to think about Nick.

(It doesn’t work.)

It's hard not to be overwhelmed in a loud and noisy mall. George feels so small, surrounded by people bustling in and out of shops and loudly conversing over something or other. Divorces, marriages, girlfriends/boyfriends, handbags, shoes, *anything* and *everything*, all at once. George sticks tightly to Clay and Nick, afraid that if he does anything other than that they'll disappear and he will be left alone.

(It's stupid, of course-- Clay and Nick have already made it very clear to George that they're not going to leave him alone, no matter what-- but the monologue in his brain reminds him at inopportune moments just how alone he is, that--)

Nick pulls Clay and George into a store selling winter gear.

"George, come take a look at these," Nick says plaintively, pointing at the thick winter coats. George scans over them, humming a little.

"Don't think about the price tag," Clay says.

"What? I'm not?" George protests. Clay shakes his head.

"You went straight for the cheaper coats, George."

George... realizes it.

"Just pick a coat," Clay suggests. "Like, one that you like. And don't look at the price tag. Don't even be weird about it."

"I'm not being *weird* about it," George grumbles as he finds a blue coat with a fluffy interior and a detachable hood filled with a whiter fluff. He runs his hands through the hood, finds it wonderfully soft— and he pulls it from the rack. It seems like it's in his size, so... he tries very hard not to immediately go for the price tag dangling from the sleeves, pushing it into Clay's arms.

“There, see?” George says, looking up at Clay. “Not being weird about it.”

Clay wheezes a little.

“Yeah, alright. Come on, I think Nick’s looking for pants.”

They find Nick standing at an aisle looking at thermal clothes. Nick lifts one of the packets containing a thermal underwear pack-- George thinks it probably contains a shirt and long pants, judging by the graphic on the front of the packet.

“Hey, George, you want one of these?” Nick asks, flashing the packet at George. “They’re pretty warm. Might help you out when we’re outside.”

“Uh, sure,” George says. “But-- you can’t try those on, right? How am I supposed to know what size--”

“You’re probably a small or a medium, honestly,” Nick says, throwing a packet at Clay.

“What’s that supposed to mean,” George grumbles.

“Means that you’re very skinny,” Nick says, “and delicate. Like a fine porcelain doll.”

George flushes.

Nick realizes the implications and flushes as well.

“Not weird,” Nick gets out. “I’m not trying to be weird.”

The rest of the shopping spree goes by in a blur. George isn’t too sure whether it’s because it’s so loud or the butterflies in his head are causing him to feel fuzzy, as if he was watching himself with Nick and Clay, dragged along like an extra in his own movie.

But at the end of the day, he’s got a new and proper coat of his own, a hoodie and a long-sleeved shirt, a set of brown khakis, and new sneakers.

Something in his heart squeezes again when he puts up his coat next to Nick and Clay's.

Like he belongs, like he's the final puzzle piece needed for Nick and Clay to be complete.

And for a brief instant, he wills himself to believe it.

vi.

It doesn't feel like a week.

George sits at the bed once more, staring out the window into another field of what appears to be corn as Clay drives by the field.

It's been a week of talking with Clay and Nick, pressed between them in bed and feeling like he's soaring on some kind of crazy sugar-induced high. Eating with them, getting to know Nick and Clay and *seeing* them so often. It feels strange, then, knowing that he'd only met them a week ago. That they'd opened up their arms to him only a *week* ago, and he feels better than he has in ages.

Clay stops them at a truck stop to refuel and to pick up some food.

George and Nick find themselves sitting outside the truck stop's store.

"Are you sure we're not, like, falling behind or anything?" George asks. (How quickly did it take for him to feel comfortable with saying *we* like this? Instead of *you guys* or *you* . He doesn't know.)

"Mm, me and Clay are usually pretty ahead of things," Nick says. "So don't worry about it, Gogy."

They'd taken to calling him Gogy recently.

George isn't sure how they came up with it-- it was probably Nick's idea, but it caused his heart to squeeze in a strange way and it's not like it wasn't *unpleasant* . (He likes it.)

“Oh,” George says. “Like, how far ahead?”

“Oh, we’re supposed to be like, at the premises by the end of the next month. We’ve got time,” Nick says. “It’s just November, George.”

“Oh,” George says again.

He wishes he could say more.

But Clay and Nick understand the road better than he does, and George is only ever here for the ride anyways.

You don’t fit, as much as you want to think you do.

They’re just humoring you, aren’t they?

But don’t they like me?

Why would they humor me for that long if they didn’t...?

George’s inner monologue doesn’t have a good answer.

George doesn’t know whether that’s a good thing or not.

The minutes drag on like that, with George and Nick cracking small talk. George’s never been any good at it, and Nick continues on the conversation rambling about something or other-- his hometown, Clay’s hometown, something about an apartment--

“You guys have an apartment?” George asks. “But aren’t you guys always on the road?”

“Yeah, but we try to stay home for the holidays,” Nick says. “The boss-- Techno, you know-- always like, lets us take the holidays off. He does that for every one of his employees-- I think it’s because he feels bad? Who knows, really-- but it’s nice. We try to keep it clean and we pay the rent.”

“Sounds... nice,” George says.

“I think it is,” Nick says softly. “I dunno if you wanna stick around and see it, but me and Clay would be really happy to have you.”

George doesn't doubt it.

Nick is earnest, wears all of his feelings on his sleeves and loudly, like a brand on his shirt. Like no matter what he can do, he can't hide anything.

George thinks Nick is hiding a lot of things.

“Are you sure about that, Nick?” George asks.

“What? Why wouldn't I be?” Nick asks, confused. He cocks his head at George, like a curious dog or a cat.

“I mean, you and Clay--”

“What about me and Clay?” Nick's eyes go wide, and his mouth goes agape like George just asked him something scandalous. Or horrifying.

“Just that--”

“Guys!” Clay calls. “You guys gotta come over here. I found a...!”

“A what?” Nick shouts, standing up. George stands up as well, trailing behind Nick a short ways away when--

“Is that a cat?!” George exclaims.

Clay is currently crouched down on his knees in the hard, cold dirt, an unwrapped protein bar placed out on the ground like a peace offering to a tabby cat. It's sniffing at the protein bar

curiously, almost warily.

“Come on, girl,” Clay whispers comfortingly. “Go ahead, it’s safe.”

The cat meows a little, glaring at Clay as if to say *I don’t believe you*.

Clay pouts a little-- the expression is so childish that it almost takes the breath out of George’s lungs, it’s so *different* from how Clay usually portrays himself-- like a rock, hardly moving as the gale rushes him.

The cat takes a bite out of the protein bar, and then digs in for more.

“Can we keep her?” Clay asks, looking up at both Nick and George with an expression of pure wonder and excitement. Nick opens his mouth, half ajar.

“I- uh,” Nick starts to say. “I don--”

He doesn’t finish his statement.

George, after knowing Clay and Nick for a week, knows one thing for certain:

That Nick, in no way, can ever say no to Clay. Because if Clay is like a piece of granite rock, then Nick is like the weakest piece of talc or gypsum, scarred by the tiniest scratch. And from what George can only infer as years and years of association, it only takes one scratch for Nick to fall apart and succumb to whatever Clay wants.

In the end, the cat’s on the truck.

Clay names her Patches.

Patches is a strange, new phenomenon on the truck.

At first, she doesn't seem to want to even cooperate with Clay or Nick at all. Well, she likes Clay just fine-- when he's giving her scratches or stroking her fur. She tolerates Nick just fine as well, often nuzzling against his chin or at his legs. But she also meowed up a storm because she refused to be contained in the truck.

She stopped meowing at some point, maybe because she got used to it.

They let her out and let her wander around for a bit when they enter truck stops, and she's well-behaved enough.

George thinks Patches likes him the most.

Probably because he can dedicate one hundred percent of his attention onto giving her scratches and cuddles, given that he often doesn't move from either the bed or the shotgun seat.

(It's a funny story of how George gets to sit there.

He voiced his complaint, once, that he was horribly bored and then Nick said,

"You could just sit in the front. Less boring there."

So he sits there now sometimes, too.

Sometimes George wonders if he'll reach a point with Nick where Nick will also bend for him, like a sunflower opening to the sun. Or perhaps it's more gradual, like water crashing into the peaks of a jagged cliff face, slowly wearing it smooth.)

Clay and Nick are off purchasing supplies.

He's alone with Patches, who's currently grooming herself idly.

What am I going to do?

Do I just stay with Clay and Nick forever on the road like this?

Am I really just going to uproot their entire lives, just like this?

How selfish would that be of me? For me to want that?

Patches meows at him.

George shifts his eyes down, looks at Patches with a confused look.

“What?” George asks.

Patches meows again, nuzzling at his hand. He gives her a few scratches, still confused. She pulls away from him, bats at his hand with a paw.

“Patches, *no*, you’re gonna leave a scratch,” George murmurs. Patches meows again, louder now. “God, I don’t even know what you want...”

Patches leans back on her haunches, sitting down and looking at him with a haughty look. It almost looks like she’s guessing what he’s thinking-- which is *ludicrous*, right? There’s no way for a cat to know anything about what he’s going through.

She gives him a look.

He can almost hear the *Stop being stupid* coming from Patches. Or maybe it’s the natural disposition of her look. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s got thoughts in his mind that he can’t speak out to anyone except a fucking *cat*.

“Look, it’s not that I don’t like them,” George blurts out.

Patches doesn’t break eye contact.

“Well, I do, it’s just... that I think I like them too much,” George murmurs, pulling his knees

towards his chest. “I think that if I let them get too close and they saw what kind of person I was, weak and miserable-- they might hate it. And then they’d leave. That scares me.”

Patches moves closer to him, nestles in at his side.

“But they’re not that way,” George says, stroking at Patches’ side. “They don’t seem like they’d ever give up on me, and-and yet... I just...

“I want them to stay. And to...”

The words catch in his throat.

To show me what it’s like-- to be loved so completely.

Would that be selfish of me?

Patches doesn’t have to answer him, and George almost feels envious.

“Dumbass,” George murmurs with all the love he can muster. “You don’t ever have to think about things like that, right? You just meow and act pretty and me and Clay and Nick all fawn over you.” He ruffles her fur, and he sighs a little.

The weight in his heart feels lighter, somehow.

vii.

Here’s another secret about Nick.

He’s a dumbass.

Well, maybe it’s not so much a secret as it is just a part of his character.

Nick's no stranger to the fact he's oblivious to his own feelings-- he's had to have that pointed out to him frequently, whether the feeling was jealousy, anger, sadness-- *anything* .

But at this point, he's sure that he's not being stupid about one thing.

George, he supposes.

There's something about George that draws Nick closer, like a moth to a flickering flame. Not in a way where Nick wants to *fix* George, not like that. But rather out of wanting to be there for George — to remind him that he has people who care about him. To be there and remind George that he's still *worth* something. And it's embarrassing to admit it, to even *think* about the fact that this all started because of meeting George at a far flung truck stop in the middle of nowhere.

But he thinks that he likes George.

Or cares about him.

Nick knows that he's soft. That he slips hard and falls even harder for people. He might as well admit to the feelings in his chest, blooming and pulling at the seams of his heart like bamboo roots, prolific and merciless.

Where does the line end, anyways? From care to like to love.

Nick doesn't know.

For sure he doesn't.

He doesn't know where he stands on that line with Clay.

Clay's natural care and affection makes it infuriatingly difficult for him to reconcile whether Clay's only showing so much attention to Nick because he likes Nick (like *like*, *likes* Nick in the way that Nick fervently hopes Clay does-- but he doesn't. But does he? It's hard to parse what he wants, what kinds of feelings he hopes to pull from Clay. Or George.) or if he's only doing it because that's just the way he is.

Nick doesn't want to come off needy or anything.

Because he's not.

It's not like he's left *wanting* more every time Clay does anything. He's not needy.

He's *not*.

Clay is napping in the back of the truck while George sits shotgun.

It's a new arrangement.

Not that it's unpleasant, but it's new to look across to his right and see George, entranced by the clouds and the view.

It makes his stomach flutter with butterflies.

"You know," George says as he presses his forehead against the window, "I've always wondered how you two met. How you got on the road."

"Me and Clay?" Nick asks.

"Yeah, who else?" George frowns at Nick. "Like there's a whole posse of people in this truck or something."

"Sorry," Nick blurts out immediately.

George snorts a little, a laugh leaving his lips.

Nick thinks George looks especially pretty when he laughs.

“Anyways, I can tell you,” Nick says as he focuses on the road. He tries to steel his nerves, because the last thing he wants to do now is start crying on the open road and crash into something.

(“Nick,” Clay said. “What were you running away from, back then?”

“J-just,” Nick got out through shaking sobs. “I don’t wanna go back. Clay, don’t make me.”

“I’m not. I’m not gonna,” Clay said, squeezing Nick into a tight hug. It almost hurt, and Nick was glad for it. The pain kept him from falling back into his mind, succumbing to the memories and the pain he was running from.

“I just...” Nick sniffed. “It’s-- it’s not like my parents were b-bad, y’know? I just... they didn’t love me. Like the way I needed th-them to, they just... they made it feel like it was a crime to want parents that-that loved me. That cared about me.”

“Nick,” Clay whispered, lifting his chin. “Nick, I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing, asshole? It-it’s not your fault,” Nick spat out. “I-I should just get used to it.”

“No, Nick. Nobody should ever be used to something like that,” Clay murmured. “It’s not a crime to want to be loved. It’s not a crime to have wanted people to be there for you.”

Nick’s waterworks triggered again, and he started to sob.

It doesn’t feel like I’m suffocating anymore.)

George only listens.

Nick is grateful.

("Are you lost?" Clay asked.

Nick was shivering out of his mind. The bitter cold of his plastic raincoat shocked his bones, kept his lips blue and teeth chattering. The porte cochere of the hotel wasn't an ideal place to stay, especially because he could get caught by loitering-- but he didn't have any other options.

"I'm not," Nick grumbled.

Clay, who only looked like a boy back then-- with limbs too long and too skinny and scrawny and awkward at the same time-- kneeled down to press a hand to Nick's cheek where a cut from a chain-link fence had been.

Nick nearly skittered away like a lost rat.

Clay retracted his hand.

"Sorry," Clay murmured apologetically. "It's just-- you're a stray, right? Does your cheek hurt? It looks painful."

"I-I'm fine," Nick said. "Why do you ask?"

"... Because I want to help," Clay said.

Because I want to help? What a dumb reason, Nick thought.

"Well, I don't need it."

Nick tried to stand.

He slipped immediately, slamming onto his knees. He cried out a little, realizing that he'd scraped his knees.

Clay held out his hand.

“Look, I’m a trucker. If you want, I can get something for your knees and... you’d be warm,” Clay said. “I’m not forcing you to come with me. If-if you want to, that’s just an option.”

Nick frowned up at Clay.

But he took his hand.

Warmth bloomed from somewhere in Nick’s chest, a pounding, frantic feeling in his lungs.)

“He’s done a lot for me,” Nick says. “Taking me in back then. He didn’t have to-- he could’ve just left me out there in the cold and the rain. But he didn’t.”

“Oh,” George says simply.

Nick doesn’t blame George for his lack of words. What can you say to that? As if *that’s rough, buddy* or *sorry that you had such a miserable home life* would be enough to encapsulate everything Nick has been through. Words don’t mean shit sometimes, and Nick is so sure that George knows that better than anyone.

“Is that why you took me in?” George asks suddenly.

“No-!” Nick blurts out.

George gives Nick a look.

“Yes,” Nick murmurs. “I think it’s just-- I saw you. And was reminded of me. And that’s-- that’s super selfish, right?” He laughs nervously. “I just... I thought leaving you behind would be cruel.”

“That’s selfish,” George says. “Really, really selfish, Nick.”

Nick’s heart pounds in his chest.

His ears almost throb.

“Is it selfish of me to care about you, then?” Nick asks, turning to give George a look. He’s so nervous.

George’s face goes pale.

“Nick,” George whispers.

And he sounds like breaking glass.

Nick’s heart pounds louder than ever, fogging his mind. He can’t think. Half of his body is screaming at him to run, to get away-- but the other half is fixed like a nail in a wooden plank, unable to be pulled out and driven too deep.

“Is this a joke?” George says, and his voice sounds like he’s about to cry. “Are you just doing this to hurt me?”

“George, when have I ever done anything to hurt you?” Nick whispers, a *plea* in his voice as he looks at George. George’s hands are to his mouth, his eyes glistening and glassy, his lips parted as his entire body shakes. It almost makes Nick want to let go of the steering wheel, gather George in his arms and-- do *what* ? *Kiss him*? That’d just make things worse--

“No, just-- aren’t you, aren’t you in love with--” George struggles, the words catching in his throat.

Nick’s mind pulses.

“Aren’t you in love with Clay?”

It feels like Nick has been dropped into a bath of ice water.

Like an ice cube dropped into piping hot, burning ceramic.

“I--, I’m--”

“What about me?” Clay blurts out suddenly.

Fuck.

Nick turns to the back of the truck to see Clay sitting upright, Patches lying lazily over his lap.

Clay's eyes are widened now, his face bright red. It's an expression Nick has *never* seen on Clay's face before-- that sudden, painful vulnerability.

I'm so fucked, is all Nick can think.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you'll forgive me for that cliffhanger, but if you don't...

Well whatever LMAO SKLDFM:SDLKFM

Thank you so much for the kudos and the hits and the bookmarks and the subscriptions! I'm so happy that a lot of people like this AU;; it's more support than I ever thought I would get.

I've actually got a playlist for this AU, co-curated by sharkiesketches who has been such a hypeman honestly,,!! It's four hours long and switches genres a lot, but I think it encapsulates the chaos of this AU perfectly.

The playlist can be found here:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3LxvBVRmrKjnr4Qo8kk8ZP?si=c33MMrjaSACnHDrI2vKy9Q>

Anyways, I hope you'll stick around for the next chapter!

III.

Chapter Summary

In the end/all I hope for/is to be a bit of warmth for you/when there's not a lot of warmth/to go around. -Boreas, The Oh Hellos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

i.

“Clay,” Nick stutters out. “I-I can explain, I--”

“Keep your eyes on the road,” Clay says, his voice harsher than it’s ever been in Nick’s entire life.

George is shaking in his seat.

Nick sees George out of the corner of his eye, his heart twisting hard. He feels like shit. His stomach churns, it feels like he can’t even breathe. His throat is clogged, and all he wants is to reach out for Clay, reach out for *anyone*, someone to save him, to pull him out of the mess he’s in-

He’s never felt so alone with the two people that he cares about.

I’m sorry.

Nick doesn’t know how he manages to drive them to a truck stop, but he cuts the gas too quickly, and the truck shudders to a shaky halt as Nick does the worst parking job he’s ever done in his fucking *life*.

“George,” Clay says.

“Don’t--” George’s voice comes out wounded, like Clay has branded him with a hot iron or reached into his chest to rip out his fragile beating heart.

Clay looks wounded.

Genuinely wounded.

Clay's quiet fury-- it has to be fury-- and a strange mixture of disappointment turns on Nick. Nick's never seen this side of Clay-- and it scares him. It scares him more than anything.

"You dumbass," Clay gets out. "What the hell was that? On the *open* road, you fucking idiot!"

Clay reaches out to grab onto Nick's collar, but Nick feels a sudden, horrible rush of anger and slaps Clay's hand away. He barely sees Clay flinch, sees him take a *step back* because he's afraid-- afraid of what? Of Nick? For the first time? Nick can't help but feel vindicated.

"I'm sorry!" Nick screams. "Alright? I'm sorry! I'm so sorry that I've been in love with you this entire time, you idiot! I'm *sorry* that this has just been the way I am, I'm *sorry* that I'm weak and horrible, that I haven't said anything! As if you didn't understand I was scared of love, of thinking I'm *worth anything* and all I wanted was--"

Nick's breath catches in his throat.

It hurts.

It hurts.

"I never fucking wanted this to happen," Nick gets out. Clay reaches out his hand to put it on Nick's shoulder, but he jolts back.

He doesn't want to be touched. Doesn't want to be reassured.

Nick wants this anger to *burn*. To sizzle in his gut, a volcano pressed against his throat.

"Aren't I horrible, then? For wanting to be loved by someone?" Nick utters.

“Nick,” Clay says. “You-you’re not--”

“Isn’t that what you want me to say? That I’m selfish for-for wanting more, for wanting *this* --” Nick waves his hand around the truck. “For *wanting* you.”

“Nick,” Clay says again.

“I don’t want to hear another fucking word from you,” Nick spits.

“*Nick*, ” Clay whispers. “*Please*. ”

And Clay sounds so defeated, so *desperate* for Nick to listen to him. It almost cracks his facade. Almost. Because if there’s anything Clay can do, it’s make Nick *break* .

“STOP.”

Clay and Nick’s heads snap up, and they find George-- how had Nick forgotten about *George*, pressed so tightly into the shotgun seat with Patches held to his chest, tears cascading down his cheeks.

“George,” Nick says.

“No,” George stammers. “No, don’t-- you can’t just-- you guys can’t just say that you care about me, that you want- that you want to *be* with me or anything like that and then just tear-tear yourselves apart. This-this all started because of me.” George hugs Patches to his chest, tears pouring down his face like a dam that won’t stop.

Nick wants to pull George to his chest, kiss the tears away.

At least he’s being honest with himself.

But that wouldn’t fix George’s torment.

“No,” Clay says, “George, *no*, this isn’t your fault, Nick and I--”

“***STOP!***” George yells, the tears flowing from his face. He attempts to wipe at them, stem the flood. “Just-- just stop. You-you’re making it worse, stop--”

“George,” Nick says.

“And ***you***,” George spits out, glaring at Nick with nothing but hurt in his eyes. “This is all your fault, Nick.”

Nick feels his heart crack.

Like the driest kindling, smashed underneath a hard boot.

He crumbles.

“George,” Nick whispers.

Like a prayer. Hurtfully, *hurtfully* reverent.

“You-you just-- you keep putting your feelings on me-- what am I supposed to *do* about that, huh?” George gets out through his sniffles. “You show me I-I can be *wanted* and then you-you just... I-I can’t. I just *can’t* trust you. It’s *hurting* me, you’re burning me up alive. Just-- I need to be alone.”

That’s the problem with feelings, isn’t it?

They get out.

And they hurt other people, break them beyond repair.

Am I selfish because I wanted it? Because I wanted you to feel me?

Nick doesn't look at Clay.

He *doesn't* .

But it's hard to be alone.

The truck is too small, and they bump into each other too frequently, like little magnets with polar opposite charges, drawn close together. Nick can't bring himself to look either Clay or George in the eye, hot shame flooding through his blood and he swears to God Clay has to hate him.

He's fucking ruined everything.

Nick doesn't sleep in the bed.

He sleeps at the driver's seat for the first time in years, and he isn't crying.

It's just- it has to be raining in the truck.

Right?

ii.

Clay is lost.

It feels like his compass has been destroyed underfoot, and he's been left to stare at the broken pieces.

His heart won't stop beating.

It won't stop *beating*.

Patches is curled up next to him, a comforting warmth pressed into his side.

He couldn't bear to sleep in the shotgun seat. Or look at Nick. It's not as if he's *scared* -- no, he is. He's *scared*. Not of the idea of being in a relationship with Nick-- or George, or *anyone* -- but scared of facing himself for the first time in years.

When was the last time?

("You can't keep running away forever, Clay," says his mother.

A faceless apparition. It's taken years for him to stop seeing her in the mirrors, in the windows, in the shotgun seat of his truck. Her jaundiced skin, the IV in her nose. He can still smell the sickly hospital air. He can see his sister, clinging to his arm.

"When will mom get better?" she asks him.

"Soon," Clay says.

He wills himself to believe it.

He's alone, entirely alone. Alone in the house that once felt so whole, that made him feel like he was part of something greener, something better. Now it just feels like the walls of the house collide around him, making him so, so small.

It's hard not to hate his mother.

It's hard not to hate the pale ghost that made his life hell.

But for his own sake, he forced himself to forgive her.

Because it was never a matter of forgiving her for the illness that took her-- it was a matter of learning to move on. To accept the pain so that he could plant his seeds back into the ground, grow something greener from the scorched earth.

He couldn't hold onto his sister.

If Clay has any regrets in his past, not being able to bring his sister with him on his journey is the prime regret of his entire life.

But he also couldn't have subjected his sister to losing her entire childhood.

So Clay presses forward.)

But how to move forward from this?

How does he move forward from *this* , when he feels like a roof caving in, like he's going to fall apart with the smallest touch, like driftwood being torn into shreds by the sea. He knows he needs to talk to Nick. To George. But he's afraid of hurting them. Of them pulling away from him, like fragile leaves in the breeze.

But conversations have to happen.

Things have to *hurt* , even if they're hard to deal with initially.

Would Clay have to be the judge, jury, and executioner?

He didn't want to be.

I never fucking wanted this to happen, Clay hears Nick's voice ring in his ears loud and clear.

Clay presses his hand to his lip.

I know you didn't, Nick.

Nick-- Clay's constant north star-- even if he didn't realize-- never wanted this to happen.

Clay feels horrible.

But there's nothing they can do.

Clay dreams that night.

He wakes up in an apartment.

A stark white room, cold linoleum causing his bones to ache subtly. He feels like he wants to sit there forever, sink into the floor and never pull himself out. Because anything is better than opening his eyes and having to face reality.

"Nick?" Clay says, standing up. No response.

"George?" Clay tries.

No response either.

The room is cold.

It's a simple kitchen, bright and cold light filtering in from the window. It's lonely. Like a glass castle in the middle of a faceless kingdom.

"Nobody's here, Clay," says a voice.

Clay whirls around, looks down.

It's... him.

“Who are you?” Clay asks.

“Shouldn’t you know that answer?”

It’s him, but as a kid.

His eyes are wide, full of childlike wonder. But strangely, there’s also disappointment. A gaze of a child who has been forced to grow up too fast, too soon.

“But...”

Clay looks around.

“Why did you get mad at Nick, Dream?”

Dream. The nickname for himself.

“I-I wasn’t mad,” Clay lies.

“You’re me,” his child self says. “So don’t lie. You’re already bad at lying, but the worst thing is lying to yourself. I thought we’d already been over that.”

“I-I’m not mad,” Clay says again.

“You were furious.”

Clay knows that he was. For once, the fire in his chest had refused to be stifled, and he couldn’t ball it up. He almost thinks he wanted it to happen. He wanted it, and it had hurt Nick.

“What am I going to do?” Clay asks.

“I don’t know,” his child self says. Something rough brushes against Clay’s fingers. The rough surface of a matchbox. Clay lifts it up, feels the rough spine and sees a picture of his home inscribed on the cover. It twists at his heart. “But you do know, right? You’re lying to yourself again, Dream. ”

“I’m not,” Clay whispers.

His child’s self curls his fingers around the matches.

They weigh heavy in his hand.

“You know what to do, right?”

There’s a can of gasoline in Clay’s other hand.

He doesn’t know when it was unscrewed.

He dumps it out onto the ground-- the gasoline scorches at his nose, its acrid and bitter scent flooding all of his senses into overdrive. He lights a match.

It drops onto the floor.

The entire apartment goes ablaze.

His child self smiles at him.

And then Clay wakes up in cold sweat.

He sits up, and Patches dives off his lap and disappears into a darker corner, and Clay swings his legs off the bed and approaches the front. He sees Nick slumped in the front seat, tear tracks still visible on his face.

His heart almost breaks into two.

It's a strange feeling.

He doesn't very much like it, but he also can't help but feel like he needs to feel it.

"Nick," Clay murmurs.

Nick's eyes flutter open, and he nearly backs away from Clay again.

"We-we need to talk," Clay says. "And when George wakes up, we need to talk to him, too."

Nick ducks his head.

"Is there anything left to say?" Nick says bitterly.

"There is always something," Clay murmurs.

Nick looks like he wants to say something. His lips part, his tongue darts out to lick at his lips. His lips, wet with saliva-- and Clay almost wants to lean forward. Clay's hand moves onto Nick's face, thumbing over his lower lip. Nick's breath hitches, and he almost jerks his head away from Clay again.

"Look at me," Clay whispers. "*Stay* with me."

"Clay," Nick murmurs. "We can't. I sh-- I *shouldn't*."

"I'm sorry," Clay murmurs. "I really am, Nick." Clay's hand shifts from Nick's lips to his cheek, gently tracing the edge of his cheekbone. He feels like a nerve end on fire, so many action impulses pounding between the axons and dendrites, endorphins flooding his veins. "I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't," Nick whispers. "You never do notice." But Nick has stopped looking wounded or angry, just sorrowful.

They're quiet like that, for a moment. Clay's thumb, rubbing at the peak of Nick's cheekbone.

"I forgive you, though," Nick says finally. "Because I..."

"You love me," Clay says.

Nick's breath hitches again, and Clay feels like he's back in the dream apartment, scraping a match against the matchbox. Feeling the sparks burn at his fingers, the rough edges scuffing against his thumbprint.

You know what to do, right?

He wants to set his heart ablaze.

To be of use to Nick, right at this moment--

"I'm in love with a dumbass," Nick says reverently.

"Which?" Clay asks. Because he wants to hear it.

"Both of you," Nick murmurs. "Are the absolute worst, I swear."

"Not George," Clay says. "Me, right?"

"True," Nick laughs, though it's short and not all the way there.

There's a pause, and Clay takes a breath--

"Are you going to kiss me or not?" Nick asks.

Clay wheezes a little. It feels like the breath has been taken out of his lungs, like he's just been dropped from some miraculous height and the butterflies haven't kicked in fully-- like it hasn't sunk in that Nick is *here* , that he--

That *Clay* has loved Nick for--

(*Clay remembers that day well.*

Nick pulled off his bandana, let the wind ruffle his hair out of repair of any comb-- and he laughed. Clay remembers that Nick's face was always pressed in a stern line, like linen sheets pressed only in one direction, stiff and unchanging. But his smile, like a fragile little mustard seed or plum blossom, bloomed as soon as he saw the mountains.

And then the wind.

The wind was probably where Nick realized he was free .

"Clay!" Nick shouted. "Do you see it? The mountains? They're so beautiful."

Nick's eyes shone, marveling at the sights.

"I see them," Clay said.

But he was focused more on Nick than on any other boring grey mountain. Focused on making sure Nick was safe enough to smile like that around him-- for as long as he could possibly let him.

He's sure it's beyond like, beyond care, maybe a soft give into love.)

Clay presses his lips to Nick's, soft like flower petals against the surface of a river.

Nick's lips aren't as chapped as Clay's always imagined them to be.

He's soft, softer than anything--

It's strange that he's even willing to admit to himself he's *imagined* it, as if he's a teenager back in his bedroom, desperately scouring his mind. His other hand cups the other side of Nick's face, and he feels Nick's hands wrap around his waist, like hot candle wax threatening to mold his skin, burning him completely.

Clay pulls back for air.

Nick's face is flushed, his lips bright red.

"Where did you learn to do *that*?" Nick mutters. "Show-off."

"I couldn't have you showing me up," Clay says.

It's not better, not by a long shot.

"We still need to have a talk," Clay says.

"Yeah, yeah," Nick murmurs. "If you kiss me like *that* after every talk, maybe I'd be more inclined to talk more-- ow!" Clay had flicked Nick's forehead hard with his index finger, a small *crack* noise in the silence of the truck's cab. "Jokes aside, you're right. We have to talk to George about all of this, too."

"Mm," Clay says softly.

He lets his heart feel pride that Nick's willing to take initiative.

"When he's awake," Clay says.

Nick nods.

"I'd like to have you to myself for the time being," Clay murmurs. "If you'll let me."

Nick shudders.

“Fuck you, man.”

iii.

George’s muscles complain as soon as he starts to stir. His muscles feel like they’ve been bunched up, coiled in barbed wire and stabbing a slow, syrupy pain through his tendons and nerve endings. His heart squeezes like it’s being strangled, and he can’t *breathe* .

Last night, he--

This is your fucking fault.

All of this.

You shouldn’t have lashed out at them, George, look what you’ve done-- surely they hate you by now, you fucking idiot--

Why should you even be allowed anywhere near--

Nick isn’t in the driver’s seat like he had seen last night.

Patches is, though.

Patches stares at him with baleful eyes from the driver’s seat.

“I fucked up,” George croaks out through a hoarse voice.

Patches meows. *Duh, of course you have.*

“I should go,” George adds.

Patches’s eyes narrow ever so slightly.

“What, Patches?” George murmurs. “What is it, girl?”

Patches meows more insistently now, standing up.

“You think I shouldn’t leave?”

His heart is breaking.

It feels like he’s about to fly apart at any moment, a desperate little piece of dandelion fluff on the breeze. It’s so hard to keep himself together-- but if not for himself, then at least for this cat. Patches jumps across the space between the chairs, right into George’s lap.

That’s a resounding no, George guesses. That he can’t leave. It’s as good a sign as he’s going to get, and he buries his head into her fur, shaky breaths leaving his lips. His chest feels so *hollow*, like a donut hole or a hole-puncher.

George picks up Patches with some difficulty-- she’s doing the *cat* thing where they refuse to be picked up, at all-- and he pulls open the door to the truck.

Clay and Nick are sitting at a bench outside.

George’s heart squeezes horribly, *lurches* when he realizes Nick has two cups of coffee-- Clay’s still holding his own, blowing steam from the top.

“George,” Clay says after he notices George.

“We... should talk,” Nick says.

“Yeah,” George murmurs out. He doesn’t let go of Patches-- Patches, now a little tired, he presumes-- wriggles herself out of George’s grip and moves to drape herself leisurely across his shoulders. “We should.”

The tension feels like breathing in a four by ten wooden plank.

They don’t want to talk to you.

They don’t want to see you.

They just want you out of their lives, don’t you see?

You deserve to be hurt, you know.

If they want to hurl insults at you-- you deserve it. Every single fucking word.

How did you delude yourself into thinking anyone wanted you?

“George,” Clay says first.

“I’m leaving,” George blurts out. “Next truck stop-- drop me off next to a city or something. I should-I have to get out of here. You guys have been a really big help, really-- but I don’t feel right being here-- intruding onto your space. It’s-it’s better for all of us if I just...”

If I just leave.

I bet they’ll say it’s good riddance.

That they never liked-- they never cared-- about me--

“Is that what you want?” Clay asks.

George feels like it's an electric shock down his entire body.

"I-- uh."

It's not what I want.

What choice do you have? To stay ? Don't be stupid.

"I'm sure," George lies.

"George," Clay says. "With-with all due respect, and I'm not trying to speak over you or anything, or try and assume what you're thinking-- but I think that's bullshit."

George's throat clogs.

"How would you know?" George challenges. It might've sounded convincing if it wasn't for the fact his voice cracked halfway in his sentence. "You-you guys just-- like I said, I--"

"I'm not going to force you to stay," Clay says, "but in good consciousness, I can't *leave* you outside a city somewhere you don't even know."

"But you guys don't want me around!" George screams.

He claps his hands over his mouth at that.

Nick looks absolutely wounded.

"George," Nick says. "Of *course* we want you around."

George feels gutted.

"How can you? I-I... I thought you were tired of me."

“No,” Clay insists. “We’re not tired of you, George-- we want you to stay, as-as long as you want to.”

“You’re lying,” George insists. “Y-you have to be lying... j-just like everyone else-- nobody actually wants me around. That’s why they all *left* me.”

“Who?” Nick asks.

George’s throat clogs.

Look at what you’ve done. Now they’re curious. Now they’re just going to ask about it--

They’re going to agree, they’re just gonna admit that you’ve been a fucking idiot this entire time--
-

“My... my friends, they...”

George feels like he’s right back there.

(George doesn’t really like thinking about his friends, or their faces.

It’s like thinking about them would justify everything they’ve done to him-- which isn’t true, of course. George knows deep down that he didn’t deserve to be treated like a disposable object, but that doesn’t change the fact that most of him believes wholeheartedly that he deserved to be treated like a doormat.

“Oh, George? Yikes-- I was his friend out of pity, honestly. I thought he was kinda weird, to be honest? Like... I don’t know what his whole deal is, but jeez, he’s so clingy all the time. I dunno how to like, bring it up to him lightly that none of us wanna actually spend time with him.”

“Yeah, right? I like his help though-- he keeps helping me with my homework even though none of it is due right now-- but it’s not like he knows. You act like you need him and then he’s just all over

you.”

“Honestly, he’s such a bitch about it too. He gets all whiny and entitled about getting help from us, too.”

George doesn’t want to believe it.

His friends-- people that he had trusted at the time, had loved and cared about-- were horrible people behind closed doors.

He wouldn’t have believed it if it wasn’t for the fact that he happened to be passing by a cafe and saw his friends hanging out without him.

He thought that kind of backstabbing only happened in movies. That it wasn’t a real, applicable thing in reality. But now he has to see it in real life-- hear and see people who genuinely thought he was disposable.

He’d drained all his savings trying to help these friends with everything.

Their medical bills, savings-- anything. He had basically nothing, no money to pay for his flat or for his own basic necessities. For his friends, he’d lived paycheck to paycheck with a smile, thinking that it’d have helped .

They didn’t love me.

They just thought I was a fool.

George packs up that night.

He shoves a few necessities into his ratty backpack, pulls out a notebook that he keeps his expenses in. With tears in his eyes, he finds the cheapest plane ticket he can out of Britain.

When he arrives, he's all alone again.

It feels different, now. Like his loneliness is sharper, honed on a finer edge.)

“And-and that’s it. The rest you,” George wipes at his tears, a desperate sob leaving his lips. “The rest you already know.”

He doesn’t know when Clay wraps his arms around him, but he does.

“George,” Clay whispers. “I’m so sorry you’ve had to go through all of that.”

“Why are you apologizing? It-it’s not your fault all of this happened,” George sobs. “I-I thought I was doing my best for them and they just-- they were right, to throw me aside like that. I was-- I was being selfish, and-and horrible, and--”

“*No*, George-- you didn’t deserve to be treated like that no matter what,” Nick says. His voice sounds thick, as if he’s about to cry-- and George feels his heart squeeze in guilt.

“Look, it’s-it’s in the past and it doesn’t matter anymore,” George murmurs. “I don’t want you guys to cry over me--” *You’re going to tear me apart. I have to leave , to go before I--*

“George,” Clay says. “It’s not about that. It’s not about *us* . It’s about *you* and making sure you’re alright.”

George buries his face into Clay’s shoulder, trying so hard not to think about it-- about Clay’s words, about introspecting about *himself* .

“I don’t want to think about it,” George says desperately. “It hurts to think about, and it just--”

Stop oversharing, George.

You’ve already done this once before-- they’re going to think you’re weird , that you’re being weak--

“If it hurts to think about, then you don’t have to,” Clay murmurs. “But George-- don’t blame yourself for what happened. Your friends were assholes. You didn’t deserve to be treated like that. *No one* deserves to be treated like that, no matter what.”

“I-I just,” George murmurs. “E-every time I feel like I get close to someone, I get scared-- cause I-I dunno if they’re just going to mistreat me again-- I just thought you guys would be tired of me and- and just leave me when you figured out that I wasn’t-- that I’m--”

“George, *no*,” Nick says. George feels another set of arms around him, gently squeezing his sides. It feels comforting, and George feels his throat tighten again, now with tears. “We wouldn’t ever leave you. Trust me.”

And George feels like it’s better.

Like a weight has slowly begun to pry itself from his chest.

It’s not better by the longest shot, but even if it’s small, it’s still a little better.

They get dinner at a small restaurant known for its grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup combo.

As George eats, he listens to Clay and Nick discuss.

“So,” Clay says. “If-if you wanted to be, George, you could be a part of our-- um, relationship. We’re not sure what to call it yet-- we’ll probably have to discuss more and if we’re serious about pursuing it, then we will-- but both me and Nick are serious about including you.”

George’s face flushes a little.

Nick doesn’t flush, though. He looks a bit contemplative as he watches George.

“George, what do you think?” Nick asks. “Since this is all up to you.”

“Oh, um...” George shrugs a little, spooning a mouthful of hot soup into his mouth. “Given that-- I, I trust you guys, but I think... I’m not ready for a relationship yet. But I’m-- definitely... it’d definitely be you two. For sure.” The soup warms up his entire body, spreading to his fingertips. He’s not sure whether he’s blushing because of Nick and Clay, or whether it’s thanks to the soup. “I just-- you know, it’s only been a week... and if I’m gonna be tagging along, I’ll get to spend... more time with you guys.”

“Aww, George,” Clay teases.

“I’m being serious!” George splutters. “Jeez, Clay. I want to.”

It’s strange.

Being honest with himself has always been-- difficult.

“I’m glad,” Nick says. “We wanna spend time with you too, Georgie.”

George smiles a little.

“But it’ll take work,” Clay says. “But I think it’ll be worth it.”

“It’ll hurt like hell,” Nick agrees. “But... I’ll give it my best shot, too.”

I’ll give you my best shot, too.

George doesn’t think he can say it.

It’ll take awhile before he can truly utter his feelings, pure and simple-- but by the way Clay and Nick smile at him, he thinks they know.

iv.

“Have you ever seen the mountains, George?” Nick asks while driving.

“Um, not really,” George says. “Do pictures count?”

“Not really,” Clay says from the back of the truck. “It’s different seeing them up in person-- super tall and formidable. It makes you feel small, but in... kind of a nice way, I guess? Nick and I have a favorite route we go along when we take this trip. The mountains are absolutely beautiful.”

George watches out the window.

The grey mountains look close. But it probably can get closer.

“How long before we get into the mountains?” George asks.

“Hm... maybe three days or so? Two if we drive longer. It’s up to you, George,” Nick says.

“I’m fine with whatever you guys want to do,” George insists.

“George,” Nick says, his voice low. It’s that strange tone, that cadence that makes George’s face go red, his belly thrum with something strange. He doesn’t want to come off needy-- he worries about the impression he’s made on Nick and Clay with his emotional outbursts-- even if George knows that Clay and Nick wouldn’t abandon him anymore, have never *wanted* to abandon him for anything--

“Nick,” George answers.

“You gotta make a decision,” Nick says resolutely. “We’ll go with your flow.”

George bites at the inside of his cheek, pushing his tongue into it.

“I suck at making decisions,” George whines plaintively instead.

“We know,” Clay says teasingly. “But you’ve gotta make one nonetheless.”

“Alright, fine,” George huffs. “I-I want to see the mountains earlier. So let’s drive longer.”

“There we go,” Clay says, clapping his hands. “That wasn’t too bad, right?”

George begrudgingly agrees. Something in his heart thrums with excitement, though. He’s finally going to see mountains-- mountains up in person.

And with Clay and Nick.

Something about that emphasis twists in his chest.

It’s not unpleasant.

It’s strange now, to be comfortable in Clay and Nick’s embrace. He’s tucked between them, almost fitting perfectly and yet not quite-- but for now it feels just right. Nick’s arms wrapped around his torso, George’s hand in Clay’s hair, Clay’s legs entangled with his.

Sometimes Nick and Clay whisper to each other before bed about the things they have to get done the next day.

(“Definitely need to buy more mouthwash,” Nick murmurs. “And toothpaste, Clay. Don’t forget.”

“I’m not gonna forget. You’re always the one who forgets to buy things I ask you to buy,” Clay responds. His breath tickles George’s face. “Like the one time I asked you to buy me some like, what... what was it, like a brand of jjajangmyeon I wanted, right? You said yeah, yeah, okay, don’t be stupid, you never forget, shit like that-- and then you didn’t buy me it.”

“That was a one time thing, Clay,” Nick whines.

“No, no it wasn’t. You forgot the next time, too,” Clay grumbles.

“Yeah, well, you also forgot to buy me shaving cream,” Nick retorts.

“Now that was just a one time deal. You don’t even really grow stubble that much,” Clay says. “I remember being convinced you just-- lasered it all off or something.”

“I would like to grow a beard one day,” Nick says.

“Mhm. Sure,” Clay hums.

George thinks they stay up until 2 AM mindlessly bickering like that.

He can’t be too sure, because he falls asleep halfway through the conversation. He remembers hearing Clay and Nick giggle a little as they realize he’s about halfway through sleep’s door.)

Clay pulls out a packet of pretzels.

“Sorry about the bad breakfast, George,” Clay says. “But we’re going to definitely be in the mountains today. So I hope that makes up for it.”

George breaks open the bag of Funyuns and puts one in his mouth.

“It’s okay,” George says. “You guys have like-- sort of... been spoiling me for a bit. So it’s fine, I can probably take this.”

“It’s not really spoiling, I think,” Nick hums as he bites into a cheese puff. “It’s just giving you a good breakfast. I mean, like-- look at you. You’re kinda thin. Way more twinkish than I gave you credit for.”

George sputters.

“What? What the hell does that have to do with anything?” George exclaims. “I-I mean, I know I’m thin, but like--”

“It just doesn’t look like you’ve eaten well, and--”

George takes the empty bag of Funyuns and throws it at Nick’s face.

Nick cackles a little, and George finds himself laughing along, a brilliant sound in the tiny truck

cabin.

George initially thinks the mountains can't get any bigger.

He's quickly proven wrong the moment they enter the mountains.

He rolls down the window, pokes his head out to look out onto the spiraling roads wrapping around stone and clumped trees and lets the wind toss his hair back out of repair. He squints a little against the wind, trying to focus on the sights in front of him-- and then the trees thin out as they drive close to the edge of the cliff, with only a thin railing keeping them from falling off the cliff.

It's literal hell driving with Clay as they head up the mountain.

George knows that Clay is reckless, but he didn't really expect Clay to be so--

So out of control on the mountain. Like he takes absolute pleasure in the fact that George nearly screams for his life several times as they swerve dramatically up top the mountain. But George trusts Clay. Trusts him enough to know that Clay wouldn't actually go beyond the boundaries they've built for now-- but that doesn't mean he isn't fucking *terrified*.

"Clay, can-can you drive a little slower," George stammers out.

"Huh?" Clay asks, looking at George.

There's a bit of a teasing grin on his face.

"Clay," George whines. "You're gonna make me sick."

"Okay, okay. Alright." Clay revs the engine.

"Clay," Nick says from the back of the truck. "Have a little mercy on him-- he probably hasn't seen

mountains this high before.”

“Yeah, I haven’t,” George whines. “Be nice to me. I’ll cry if you don’t.”

Clay wheezes out a laugh. It sounds painful, almost like decompressing air out of a balloon.

George... has always been a bit jealous of how Clay can throw himself easily into a laugh, like it’s the most carefree thing in the world. He looks at Clay now, cackling as if there’s nothing other than the truck, him, Nick-- and he feels like it’s right. That this is the thing he’s been waiting for-- the loving embrace that he needs to feel whole.

“So, there’s this scenic outlook we usually rest for the night at,” Nick says. “It’s like-- totally illegal, for sure, since the sign says ‘no solicitors’ but we spend the night on it anyways.” As Nick speaks, he rolls out another blanket onto the ground.

“Oh?” George asks.

Clay had parked the truck at the summit of the mountain at around sundown, and they’d milled around the microwave attempting to make ramen.

(Clay pulls out the packet of jjajangmyeon.

“Are you just going to hold this over my head forever?” Nick whines.

“I mean, maybe. Since you seemed so intent on doing that last night,” Clay says as he cuts open the packet with a pair of scissors, dumping the noodles into a bigger styrofoam bowl. He pours the hot water into the bowl, covering it with a piece of cardboard and just... standing there.

George stifles a laugh.

“Fuck you, man,” Nick grumbles as he pours his own cup of hot water into a bowl of cup noodles.

“How many cups of that shit do we still have?” Clay asks. “I want that all gone by the New Year’s.”

“I have... no idea to be honest? I think I bought like, the value pack--”

“The value pack had like, twenty of those! How many of these have you actually eaten?” Clay asks, raising an eyebrow. Nick sputters a little, leaning down to open up a cabinet.

There’s...

“I swear to god, it feels like the CUP NOODLE shrimp flavor just multiplies,” Nick says. “I swear I’d eaten more than this.” George takes a peek. It looks like there’s... still about twenty cups of noodles in the cabinet. Clay shakes his head in mock disappointment.

“You’d better get on it,” Clay says. “Not a single one of those left by the New Year’s.”

“Geooooorge,” Nick whines. “Help me finish them?”

“Ugh, fine,” George says.

The Cup Noodle Shrimp Flavor™... isn’t good.

But Nick grins at George happily, and George feels his heart bloom with warmth.)

George looks up at the sky. The sky, dotted with stars and clouds like an abstract painting. Like the heavens had been tapped with a white brush, stippled over with a dry sponge of purple and dark blue. From up on the mountain tall, it feels like he’s infinitesimally smaller— not in a way where he feels as if he doesn’t matter in the universe, but where he feels like the moment’s isolated, that the world could just be him, Clay, and Nick.

Clay and Nick are watching him.

He feels their gazes prickling at the back of his neck, a comforting reminder of their presence.

George turns his head a little, a tiny grin forming on his face.

“What?” George asks quietly.

Nick leans forward, a hand reaching to thumb at George’s lip. George’s breath hitches a little, watching Nick’s dark eyes scanning George’s face. George feels a flush growing on his face, pops of heat and sparks across his fingers, like popping candies against his tongue.

“Do you think,” Nick whispers, so softly, like he’s afraid George will break— “that wanting to kiss you right now... is that selfish?”

George’s lips part a little.

“I mean, maybe,” George responds quietly. “But I-I don’t think I would mind.”

Don’t break my heart, George thinks.

Don’t leave me alone.

George feels like his heart— his poor, fragile heart, the one he’s built thousands of walls around, built out of paper-mâché instead of stone— is going to fall apart. It’s going to break, as if it hasn’t already— as if these two men, Clay and Nick, weren’t the ones who literally ripped his heart out, bloody and so, so, *so* vulnerable. He hates it as much as he loves it, feels like every touch from them sends sparks down a live wire or an exposed nerve.

Nick presses a kiss to George’s lips, so slowly and deliberately in a way that feels just *right*, like the breath has been stolen from his lungs. The live wire grinds against the ground, forces him to just *be* in this moment, with Nick’s lips pressed against his and a hand cupping George’s cheek, George’s breath stutters in his chest, and Nick laughs a little.

“*God*,” Nick murmurs.

“Don’t leave me out of this,” Clay murmurs quietly, wrapping his arms around George’s waist. He rests his chin on George’s shoulder, a gentle and teasing reminder that he’s still there.

“Sorry,” Nick responds, though he doesn’t really sound like he’s sorry at all.

And to his credit, George feels like he’s floating on some kind of high, with only Nick and Clay to anchor him to the ground.

It’s nice.

I’m home, George thinks.

I think— I think I’m finally, finally home.

V.

There are few things Nick is scared of.

One of them is their boss, “Dan Technoblade”. (It’s not his real name, of course— Nick really does know that, but Dan had set down his placard with his name and Nick had tried to say, “ *But Technoblade isn’t even a valid last name. And I’m pretty sure your name isn’t Dan, either*” only to get a hasty look from Clay and a withering one from Techno. So now Nick just deals with it.)

The rest are smaller things. Like a fear of the dark, or spiders.

Well, maybe they’re not *exactly* small— there’s also decently big things to be afraid of besides Techno.

Like his—

It’s hard to be honest with himself, even now.

“Is Technoblade really that scary?” George asks.

“Yeah,” Clay responds. “I-I mean, well— he’s scary, but in that weird way where you know if you

tried to double-cross him, he'd have already planned your demise. He took me in just fine, really, but you don't end up being a trucker without at least *something* you're running from."

Nick agrees.

"Have I ever told you about the first time I *met* Techno?" Nick asks, turning to look at George.

George has Patches in his lap, scratching at the underside of her chin. It's very cute. George giggles softly, letting Patches bat at his chest and his fingers, but not too much, lest she start thinking that his fingers were the toys she could play with— and Nick almost doesn't hear George's response.

"No," George says. "No, you haven't told me anything about Techno."

("..."

Technoblade is not a man of many words.

He is a man of some words, judging by the books stacked against the office's bookshelf. Socrates, Plato— Sun Tzu. There are a few diplomas, a couple pictures of Techno standing with three other people, a fourth bundled in a baby blanket. Nick remains fixated on one of the pictures— Techno standing with his arms crossed firmly as a taller man stands beside him holding a guitar. They both... don't look too happy standing next to each other.

Techno's hair isn't pink in that picture.

It is now, though. It's arguably the most prominent feature on Techno's face, aside from his monotone and even expression.

Nick wonders why he'd even have a picture capturing a moment of misery like that in his office.

Clay draws his hand over his face.

“Look, Techno, please , I’m just asking you if I can register him as my partner,” Clay says, half-begging and half-pleading.

Techno takes a deep inhale through his nose.

“You do realize the legality of it is rather... dubious, yes?” Techno asks.

Clay nods.

“Techno, please. I’ll take responsibility for it if-if it means Nick will get to come.”

Techno sighs again. His eyes flit to another picture that’s turned away from Nick.

“Alright, fine. Nick, what do you have to say to that?”

Nick blinks.

“Me, sir?” Nick asks, pointing at his nose.

Techno rests his elbows against the table, props his chin up by his hands.

“Who else would I be speaking to? What’s your say on the matter? Did Clay actually kidnap you? Because if you aren’t willing to be his trucking partner, you have no reason to stay. I... could probably get you some kind of ticket. Go wherever you need, hot meal, whatever,” Techno says brusquely.

“No, I do!” Nick exclaims. “I-I also have my license, so there’s no issue with-with like, me driving or anything, Techno— sir.”

Techno laughs.

It's a strange laugh. Almost sounding forced, like he's not actually happy, but that can't even be right.

"I don't need the formalities. As long as you've got your priorities in order, you're in. Welcome aboard, Nick."

Nick leaves that meeting thinking that Techno is scary.

Well-meaning, but scary.)

"He's a bit older now, though. There's more to be worried about, so I dunno if he's still that nice," Nick says, flicking on the turn signal. "Well, actually, last month we had to do our check-in, you wanna hear about that too?"

"I mean, I'm stuck in the truck with two dumbasses, the least I can do is listen to you," George says cheerfully.

"Oi," Nick protests.

"Oi," George mocks.

"You're being a real asshole right now, George. Just because you're cute and you can get away with it doesn't mean you should actually use your mouth to just— mouth off," Nick huffs.

"Real descriptive, Sapnap," Clay teases.

"You think I'm cute?" George sounds gleeful, but almost in awe. Nick let's that squeeze at his heart, doesn't push it away. It's a strange feeling, but it settles in his limbs, like a soft and pleasant tingle.

"Don't even start," Nick huffs. "Clay, you wanna tell that one?"

Clay laughs, putting his hands behind his head.

“Mm, sure. Why not. I think I know more about Techno than you.”

(Techno... looks like a right mess.

He runs his hand across his hair, dark brown already showing through a faded pink. He tweaks his glasses, pressing them up the bridge of his nose. Nick remembers the month before, Techno was wearing contact lenses. It's strange. But Nick doesn't comment on it. He knows the last thing Technoblade usually wants to hear is that he's looking different, or slipping.

“Uh, Tech,” Clay says. “So, about the next shipping...”

“What? Yeah, right. Textiles,” Techno says. “Uh, old route, you know the deal. Deliver it on the northern route, this one.” Techno gestures, tracing the path on the map on his desk. “Two months sound good to you?”

“Yeah,” Nick says. “Uh, Tech—“

“Look,” Techno gets out, leaning back into his chair. “I’m so busy. I think I’ve been getting migraines lately. Have you ever had one of those? It’s like my entire body wants me to shut down with a vengeance .”

“Not really, Tech... sure you don’t need like, medicine or something?” Clay asks. “We can go to the pharmacy and like, pick up something for you—“

“No, no. It’s fine.” Techno waves his hand. “I’m just... I’m waiting on a phone call right now. You know your assignment, right? So just... yeah. Be on your way, have a safe trip. Don’t crash the truck, don’t trash it like Schlatt and Alex have been doing, take breaks, but not too many—“

The phone rings.

Techno’s eyes widen.

“Alright, you guys need to go,” Techno blurts out.

“What??” Nick asks, confused. “Techno, are you alright?”

“Will be, once you get the hell out of the room,” Techno says brusquely. “Sorry about this.”

He half ushers, half shoves Clay and Nick out of the room.

He hears something.

“What, Wil?” Techno is saying. “... fine. Whatever, I don’t give a shit.”

Clay exchanges a look with Nick.

No words need to pass between them, but they’re really not sure what the hell happened.)

“... so like, does he have family drama, or something?” George asks, squeezing Patches close to his chest. She’s purring loud enough that Nick can hear it from all the way across the cab.

“Me and Clay think it’s kinda rude to gossip about him, but I think so,” Nick responds. “We’re not really sure to what, like, extent it is— but he’s kinda been slipping for awhile without any real explanation, so like— me and Clay think that’s the only explanation for it. I dunno, to be honest. But I think he’ll still be nice to you.”

“Well, we can only hope,” Clay says. “I dunno what he’ll say to us, honestly. He might give me some lip for repeating history.”

“Oh, shit, you’re right,” Nick realizes.

“You think he’ll let us keep George?” Clay asks in a conspiratorial tone.

“I mean, we already have him. What’s he even going to be able to do, send him back?” Nick asks in an equally conspiratorial voice.

“I am *right here*,” George says.

“Look, we didn’t forget,” Clay responds. “But it-it’s actually a question we might have to ask.”

Nick knows.

He hopes Techno isn’t going to be too pissed about it.

After a couple more hours of driving, punctuated by raucous karaoke and horror podcasts, (“*Hey, Nick, if I was to be chosen by an Entity in the Magnus Archives, who do you think would pick me?*” “*The Eye, you fucking creep.*” “*I’m gonna take that as a compliment...*”) they get to the drop-off point where they have to check in and drop off the truck for maintenance.

“Should I come along?” George asks.

“Nah, it’ll be fine. I think.” Nick kills the ignition, spinning the keys around his index finger. “We’re gonna try and make it brief.”

They step out of the truck.

Nick and Clay know the maintenance guys— a kindly guy named Luke as well as his silent companion, Ponk— like the backs of their own hands. Luke taps at a clipboard, checking off a few preliminary check marks.

“Hey, you two,” Luke says politely. “What’s up?”

It’s easy to let Clay take control of the conversation, where Nick can simply just watch and observe.

“Well, nothing much. We’ve been on the road,” Clay responds.

“I can see that. Early as usual.” Luke notes that on his clipboard. “Techno must be pretty proud of having diligent employees.”

“Mm, I dunno,” Clay says. “Techno’s kind of withdrawn, not that it’s a bad thing, really.”

Luke hums, nodding at that.

“I’m assuming your truck is still fine and passes most of the inspections?” Luke asks. “Not that this is just me being lazy, though I guess it’s part of it— but you guys have been on the road long enough to know what you’re doing, right? Any new developments, any at all?”

“Uh...” Clay rubs at the back of his neck. “Mmm... we got a new driving partner. Well, not really a partner... more like... a guy we picked up along the way?”

Luke whistles.

“Yikes. Did you kidnap him or something?” Luke asks. He puts his clipboard on his shoulder, behind his head.

“No!” Nick protests at once.

Luke raises an eyebrow smartly.

“Uh... I guess in some ways you could view it as an initial kidnapping... but he’s okay with it.” Nick presses his fingers together, looking somewhat hesitant. Luke gives Nick more of a skeptical look, baring his teeth with a slight hiss.

“That’s... not convincing at all,” Luke says. “Are you sure Techno’s not gonna have any qualms about it? ms with that?”

“That’s the thing, isn’t it,” Clay says. “We’re not really sure how Techno’s going to react to anything. I thought he was just gonna yell at me when I first brought Nick into the office, but he just... he was really cool about it.”

“I guess,” Luke says. “Well, your truck looks to be in good shape. I hope that whole... Techno thing... gets a resolution.”

“Yeah, I hope so too,” Nick murmurs.

Cause I dunno what I’ll do if Techno yells at us about this.

“So,” Techno says.

Techno looks to be slightly more cheery than the month prior, though much wearier as well.

Maybe it’s because of the two kids sitting next to him. Nick has to admit that the moment he’d seen the two kids sitting next to Techno, he’d been half-alarmed, half-amused. He’d been pretty close to making a cutting or trite remark, but Techno had given Nick a look, as if he’d known what Nick was going to say.

“Ignore them,” Techno says. “I owed a favor— I’m babysitting.”

“Like hell,” one of the kids says. He squints at Nick, Clay, and George with an appraising look. “You guys look weird—”

“Tommy,” Techno says warningly. “Please be like Tubbo— he’s just sitting quietly. If you’re being too loud, I’ll tell Wilbur you were being disruptive and he’ll ground you, or something. I have literally no idea how he disciplines you.” The other kid, a boy dressed in a green hoodie, is quietly swinging his legs back and forth. Tommy huffs.

“Fine, whatever.” He sits down begrudgingly, and Techno sets— a Nintendo Switch?? Nick nearly bursts into laughter at this— in front of them, and that seems to distract Tommy and Tubbo long

enough.

Techno fixes his gaze on Clay.

“So,” Techno says, picking up a pencil and pointing it at Clay. “Explain.”

“E-Explain what, sir?” Clay giggles nervously.

“Don’t play coy with me, you *know* what I’m talking about. The *guy* squeezed between you two right now.” Techno gestures the pencil to jab it at George. “Now *explain* him.”

“Look,” Clay says. “He-he was like, really cold and we found him after we finished the first part of the route... we just thought we’d take pity on him and-and you know, bring him along with us...”

“So... you kidnapped him,” Techno says. “Clay, I’m getting a weird sense of *deja vu*.” Techno fixes Nick with an inscrutable look. Nick feels like he’s going to melt into the floor. Whether it’s out of laughter or out of actual fear of how peeved Techno looks, he’s not quite sure.

“No, we-we didn’t,” Nick gets out. “He went with us willingly, right, George?”

George nods emphatically at that, giving a casual thumbs-up. George’s eyes are widened though, and he almost looks like he’s shaking in his seat. Nick squeezes George’s hand under the table, and George stops shuddering so much. He shoots Nick a grateful look, and Nick smiles in response. Techno pinches the space between his brows, an exhausted sigh leaving his lips.

“Look, I have a feeling you’re not telling me the complete truth,” Techno says. “But like, I’m inclined to let this slide because you’re good at what you do. Does... does George have a license? Can he sign any papers about like, driving or whatever? Does he have a visa? A green card? He’s got a British accent, you know, there’s literally no way he’s *born* here--”

“I applied for like, a visa a bit ago,” George says. “Before I even... came here.”

Techno lets out a sigh of relief.

“Alright, just. God. Whatever. As long as this doesn’t become a regular thing, *Clay*,” Techno says, pointedly giving Clay a look.

“It’s never been a regular thing! It’s been *years* since Nick joined me!” Clay protests weakly.

“Well, it happened more than once,” Techno responds. He presses his glasses up the bridge of his nose again, running a hand through his hair. “Look. George, consider yourself-- on the team. For now. And as long as Clay and Nick can keep you in check-- or if you keep them in check-- or like. Whatever the hell the dynamic is, over here--”

Nick is really struggling not to break into laughter.

“Nick,” Techno says.

Nick’s shoulders stop shaking as much, but he laughs into his hand almost breathlessly.

“Look, I’m just going to say it again. Whatever the hell your dynamic is, here, I’ll let it be since it’s not doing you all any harm. But I’m just going to put it out there-- you *all* are on thin ice. You included, George,” Techno says, turning to stare George down. George nearly squeaks a little. Clay wraps his arm comfortingly around George’s shoulders, smoothing down his shoulder. “Do I make myself clear?”

George nods.

“Crystal.”

Techno leans back in his chair, pressing his palms together.

“Alright, then. Now that I’ve made myself clear, get the hell out of my office.”

“Techno,” Tommy whines. “Tubbo keeps beating me in Smash--”

“Oh, good grief,” Techno bemoans. “Clay, Nick, and now George-- I’ll just... give you a call after New Year’s about your next assignment. Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas, Merry Kwanza, whatever nondenominational, secular holiday you celebrate--”

“It’s not my fault, you’re just bad,” Tubbo huffs.

“Yes, thank you,” Clay gets out. “See you later, boss.”

Nick, Clay, and George pile out of the office, half in giggles and half wheezing desperately for air. As they shut the door, George slumps his shoulders almost out of relief.

“You good, George?” Nick asks worriedly.

“Yeah, I-I am,” George gets out. “I-I just. *Wow*, that was crazy. I didn’t think Technoblade was like that. I know you were like, telling me all those stories, but it’s different seeing him in person. And with like, those two? That was weird. I didn’t think he’d-- you guys were saying about the-the whole family thing... sorry. I’m not making much sense, am I?”

“I mean, it’s fine,” Clay says. “We get it.”

George nods gratefully.

“Yeah, you do.”

Nick smiles, throwing his arm around George’s shoulder, pressing his face close enough to where he’d be able to rub at George’s face.

“Alright, with all that side, guys-- I think we’re set to go back to our apartment.”

Ours.

That’s nice to say.

To finally acknowledge that George is a part of their life, whether he liked it or not.

But with George's look of amazement-- Nick can't help but think that George *does* like it, and their paths will be entwined for as long as possible. Like the three frail pieces of untwined rope, finally coming together to become whole. To become *better* .

And Nick thinks that it'll be alright.

vi.

The drive to the apartment is long.

Not particularly long, given that George has now been on the road for countless hours, but time always seems to grind to a faltering halt whenever you're excited to see something.

(*"It's really not a big deal," Clay says, a flush forming on his face. "It's just an old apartment. It's probably still dirty right now, too."*

George shakes his head.

"If it's yours, I think I won't mind."

"Hey, Clay," Nick says. "Do you think we left the heater on the entire time?"

"We better have fucking not," Clay says severely. "I don't even wanna think about the utility bill. We've still had to pay it... but the heating utility bill didn't seem off? Now you're just going to make me think of it. Jesus."

"Sorry, sorry," Nick laughs easily. "It's just so easy to, you know-- fool around like that. Remember that one time, I'd asked you if you shut off the stove or not, and then you were like ' no, Nick, I'm sure I did' but you weren't really sure, so you like... turned the entire truck around to go and check at home."

"I remember that," Clay says. "Still haven't forgiven you for that."

"I know, I know, babe. Sorry," Nick murmurs.

Clay's face goes red.

George laughs a little.

He's excited.

To form those kinds of memories-- to capture them with people he loves.)

Clay parks the car in the parking plaza in front of the apartment.

That was another thing he had to learn.

That Clay and Nick have their own car when they're not trucking.

("It's impractical driving the truck everywhere. We've made ourselves pretty comfortable in it since we do a lot of the work there, but it's just weird to park it in the apartment complex, you know?" Nick says.

"Yeah, I guess. It's just kind of weird seeing you guys in a vehicle that isn't a truck," George comments.

*"Well, I guess there's still time to get used to it," Clay responds, a grin forming on his face.
"Right? It's not that bad. I think we'll be driving around in this car for a bit."*

"Mm..." George amends. "I'm getting used to it. It's still pretty nice.")

It's an SUV, still decently comfy. George hugs the shotgun seat, toying with Nick's hair. Nick pulls George's hands away gently, looking up at him with a small smile. They pile out of the car, George's limbs already somewhat weary from moving around so much.

Clay pulls out the keys to the apartment, unlocking the door.

"After you, George. Take a look," Clay says with a small grin.

George steps into the apartment, taking a look around. It's almost everything he expects from Clay

and Nick-- dark grey couches dotted with throw pillows in yellows-- he's pretty sure some of those are green, but he can't really tell the difference. The walls are dotted with prints or paintings-- mostly impressionistic ones of flowers or landscapes. There's a TV stand with a Playstation still plugged in. He can see a bit of the dinner table, set up with fake plastic flowers in the center (they have to be fake, because they haven't wilted). It's--

"Is it that bad?" Clay asks, coming up besides George.

"No," George says. "It's yours, isn't it?"

Clay smiles.

"Yeah," Clay breathes out. "Yours, too, now."

Clay leans forward a little, lifting George's chin.

George melts easily.

He wonders if he's just being too easy-- whether he's just falling too easily, like a flower opening up to a spring that's just about to fall onto another frost. And yet, he knows that the frost won't come-- because that's just not who Clay is. Clay is the warmest spring, like the gentle wind brought by Zephyros. And George presses his face forward, cups Clay's face and kisses him.

Clay welcomes it readily, cups George's face and lets George melt into him.

Nick comes up behind them, wrapping his arms around George's waist and George gasps a little into the kiss.

Clay pulls away, grinning a little.

"Welcome home, George," Clay murmurs.

George smiles.

I'm home.

He's home, finally, with two people who love him.

Extra: vii.

True to his word, Clay makes the movie date Darryl suggested a month ago happen. But it doesn't really happen in a truck stop-- it happens in their apartment. As soon as Darryl steps through the door, his eyes shine when he sees George. (Zak steps in quietly to talk to Nick, though he also gives George a bit of a strange look. Not like 'what the hell', but more like 'oh, so that's... a different development.')

"Oh my goodness," Darryl says. "*Hello* , George! It's really such a pleasure to meet you." He reaches out to grasp George's hand, shaking it enthusiastically. "I don't know if Clay ever spoke about me, since I'm sure you all were really busy."

Clay feels a swell of pride when George doesn't pull away from Darryl's touch almost immediately.

"Oh, I think I've heard of you," George says. "But yeah, really nice to meet you, Darryl! I-I hope we can... become friends."

Darryl's smile is so, so wide.

"Yes, of course we can be friends! Honestly, when I first saw you-- you know, you were just sleeping on Nick's shoulder," Darryl says, giving Nick a knowing look.

Nick almost drops his bowl of tortilla chips.

"I-I thought that I was being slick," Nick says weakly.

Zak takes a tortilla chip.

"Uh, Darryl?" Clay asks awkwardly. "Please don't tell me like--"

“Huh? I knew that you guys were totally lying about George being your new driving partner,” Darryl says simply. “Like-- come on. I’ve known you guys for a bit! And if you had a new driving partner, you would’ve told me. For sure you’d only *just* met George right there, and you didn’t know how to deal with it!”

Clay coughs into his closed fist.

“Uh, Darryl, that’s fine. You-you really don’t have to say it,” Clay wheezes out.

“So I was right! I was just way too nice to say it. And let me guess, now he’s your boyfriend--”

“ *DARRYL.* ”

“So I’m right?” Darryl asks, with a shit-eating grin on his face.

George’s face is bright red.

“Okay,” Clay says defeatedly. “You’re right. You’re so right.”

Darryl starts to laugh boisterously.

It’s not that bad, Clay thinks.

To be here, in this moment.

But Clay doesn’t think he’d have it any other way.

“Alright, since we’ve got the fact that Darryl is right out of the way, can we just watch the movie?”

“Yeah,” George and Nick both say immediately. “For sure.”

Yeah.

I think we're going to be okay just like this.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading about the trucker boys, honestly over 200+ kudos (and at the point of me writing these notes, nearly 300) and 60+ bookmarks and like, 100+ something subscriptions? that's meant so much to me and you guys have really kept me writing
I don't know if this is the end of the trucker boys, but I really have enjoyed writing this let me know if you like, want to see more of them because i may write it!!
I hope the dream team as trucker boys lives on in your mind as long as these guys have in mine :-D

End Notes

my ultimate goal is to make you kin a stupid white boy sitting in a truck
follow me on twitter at @134340_kath and on Instagram at @kath_trash for more dteam content.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!